WORKING-CLASS POLITICS

IN BIRMINGHAM AND SHEFFIELD, 1918-1931

John Boughton

Submitted in fulfilment of the
degree of Ph. D. at the Centre
for the Study of Social History
at the University of Warwick.

March, 1985

SUMMARY

Working-class politics in Birmingham and Sheffield contrasted sharply in the 1920s - Birmingham was a bastion of working-class Conservatism, Sheffield, a Labour stronghold. In the first half of the thesis, we explored this contrast by an examination of the economic, social and political conditions which underlay it.

Sheffield's large-scale industry was found to reinforce working-class values and trades union traditions which facilitated Labour's political rise. Birmingham's diversified, often small-scale, economy impeded the development of working-class consciousness and eased inter-class relations.

These differences were reflected in the towns' working-class communities. The forms of Sheffield society consolidated the working-class loyalties of which Labour affiliations became one aspect. Birmingham society was more penetrable and possessed a powerful civic tradition of cross-class cooperation.

In local government, Birmingham retained a confident, reforming middle-class leadership fulfilling the heritage of Joseph Chamberlain. Sheffield's middle-class politicians retreated into reactionary oppositionism which hastened Labour's advance. Contemporary events in the national economy and politics strengthened Labour's claim to be the real party of the working class.

In the second half, we studied the content of working-class politics; examining, firstly, Labour's principles and practice. Ethical and constitutional values, combined with a commitment to practical reform, were found dominant. A genuine party life of extra-political activities existed but its scope and ambitions were modest.

Cooperation shared similar values, allied with an ambiguous attitude towards political action which strained relations with the wider Labour movement. The revolutionary Left was active but its aggressive style and far-reaching demands distanced it from the broader working class.

In conclusion, we looked at working-class Conservatism - still influential and with several ideological and structural strains in working-class culture perpetuating its appeal. We viewed it, particularly among the poorer strata, as one method of getting by in a life deemed fundamentally unalterable.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

In text:

In appendices:

PREFACE

This thesis sets out to examine the nature of working-class politics in two of Britain's major industrial cities in the years after the First World War. Our case-studies, Birmingham and Sheffield, have been chosen both for their representativeness and uniqueness. In socio-economic terms, they were manufacturing cities with a predominantly working-class population and, though there were significant differences in the weighting of these constituents, they each contained a representative range of large- and small-scale industry, skilled and unskilled work, male and female employment. There is scope, therefore, for both comparison and contrast.

In political terms, however, the two cities were markedly dissimilar. Birmingham remained a bastion of working-class Conservatism throughout the interwar period. Labour won only seven parliamentary elections in the city between 1918 and 1945 and, of these victories, six occurred in 1929. The Party fared equally badly in municipal contests; at its peak in 1929, Labour had just 36 representatives on a council comprising 120 aldermen and councillors. In Sheffield, by contrast, Labour secured its first parliamentary victory in 1909 and thenceforth its M.P.s were regularly returned with commanding majorities. Only under the exceptional conditions obtaining in 1918 and 1931 was this not the case. More importantly, in 1926, Sheffield became the first large town to come under Labour control and Labour has, to date, retained its majority on the city council for all but two of the subsequent years.

Our primary task is, therefore, to explain why the political affiliations of these two working-class cities should have diverged so dramatically. What made Birmingham the 'Mecca of Unionism'; why should Sheffield have been so rooted in its loyalty to Labour? In the first half

of the thesis, we analyse the economic, social and political circumstances of Birmingham and Sheffield in order to assess how their operation may have influenced the two towns' differing political evolutions. Inevitably, as we do this, larger questions concerning the means by which working-class political loyalties were formed and shaped are raised as we seek to discover the socio-economic bases of particular types of working-class politics and to determine the autonomous role of politicians and their actions.

In the second half of the thesis, though we continue to concentrate our attention on Birmingham and Sheffield, the comparative framework is, for the most part, abandoned. Here, we examine the politics of the working-class activists themselves when we describe the nature of their activism and ideology and their involvement in the extra-political side of party life. Labour, the major party of the working class, is accorded the most coverage but we also look at the political aspirations of those in the working class who supported the Cooperative movement, the parties of the revolutionary Left and Conservatism.

We have sought throughout this study to give due weight to the sentiments and behaviour of the ordinary working person and rank and file activist. It is unavoidable, however, that the sources which survive - minute books, personal correspondence, newspapers, and the like - tell mostly of those who achieved some kind of individual prominence in political life. Within these limitations, we have, nevertheless, been concerned to stress local perspectives and activism and the role of the parties' local members rather than that of their national leaderships and central organisation. Where possible, the printed sources and official records have been supplemented by oral history techniques.

We are fortunate, as the bibliography makes clear, that plentiful documentation survives for both Birmingham and Sheffield. Birmingham, however, possesses one invaluable source that is not shared by Sheffield - a weekly Labour newspaper, the Town Crier. We have made considerable use of this important source. There is also a disparity in respect of the Conservative records which are extant - those for Birmingham being far superior. Whilst this is partly fortuitous, it undoubtedly reflects too the greater strength of Unionism in the Midlands city. The concentration on the Birmingham case in our analysis of working-class Conservatism is necessitated but it is also, in view of the unique vitality of the phenomenon in that city, quite defensible.

A large number of librarians and archivists have been helpful and informative but special thanks go to Marion Large and the staff of the Social Science Department of Birmingham Central Library, the staffs of the Local Studies Departments of the Birmingham Central and Sheffield City Libraries, Richard Storey and the staff of the Modern Records Centre of the University of Warwick Library, Stephen Bird of the national Labour Party archives, and the librarians at Communist Party headquarters in London. I am also grateful to Mr. Bill Moore and the Sheffield secretary of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (Foundry Workers' Section) for allowing me to view documents held in private possession. A number of people, politically active in Birmingham and Sheffield in the interwar period, allowed themselves to be interviewed and I thank them for the time and trouble they went to to help my work.

My father has been a conscientous and hard-working proof-reader of my erratic type-writing. The errors and infelicities which remain are, of course, my responsibility.

Finally, I should refer to the support and assistance given by my fellow students and the staff of the Centre for the Study of Social History at the University of Warwick. Dr. James Obelkevich read the first draft of the thesis and made a number of helpful and constructive suggestions. My supervisor, Dr. Tony Mason, has given a great deal of advice and encouragement and has been a constant source of useful, informed and always good-humoured criticism.

NOTE ON FOOTNOTES

All works published in London unless otherwise stated.

The meetings of the Sheffield Federated Trades and Labour Council were not clearly differentiated by function until the late 1920s. Where a gathering was explicitly described as a political (i.e. Labour Party) meeting in the minutes, this information has been included in the relevant footnote.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations used in text:

AEU	=	Amalgamated Engineering Union
ASLEF	=	Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen
BSP	=	British Socialist Party
CP(BSTI)	=	Communist Party (British Section of Third International)
ILP	=	Independent Labour Party
ISTC	=	Iron and Steel Trades Confederation
NAUL	=	National Amalgamated Union of Labour
NSBMM	=	National Society of Brass and Metal Mechanics
NUFW	=	National Union of Foundry Workers
NUGMW	=	National Union of General and Municipal Workers
NUGSAT	=	National Union of Gold, Silver and Allied Trades
NUGW	=	National Union of General Workers
NUR	=	National Union of Railwaymen
NUWM	=	National Unemployed Workers' Movement
RCA	=	Railway Clerks' Association
SAUFT	=	Sheffield Amalgamated Union of File Trades
TGWU	=	Transport and General Workers' Union
UPOW	=	Union of Post Office Workers
WEA	=	Workers' Educational Association
YMA	=	Yorkshire Miners' Association

Abbreviations used in footnotes:

AGM	=	Annual General Meeting
BBLP	=	Birmingham Borough Labour Party
BCL	=	Birmingham Central Library
B.D.	=	Birmingham Despatch
B.G.	=	Birmingham Gazette
B.M.	=	Birmingham Mail
B.P.	=	Birmingham Post
BTC	=	Birmingham Trades Council
BUA	=	Birmingham Unionist Association
BWA	=	Bedstead Workmen's/Workers' Association
DM	=	Delegate Meeting
EC	=	Executive Committee
LP	=	Labour Party
NEC	=	National Executive Committee
NMM	=	National Minority Movement
OBU	=	One Big Union
PPBFPS	=	Pen and Pocket Blade Forgers' Protection Society
S.C.	=	Sheffield Cooperator
SCL	=	Sheffield City Library
SCoP	=	Sheffield Cooperative Party
SCP	=	Sheffield Communist Party
S.D.I.	=	Sheffield Daily Independent
S.D.T.	=	Sheffield Daily Telegraph
SFTLC	=	Sheffield Federated Trades and Labour Council
S.F.	=	Sheffield Forward
T.C.	=	Town Crier
Un. Lab.	=	Unofficial Labour
WC	=	Workers' Charter
BCoP	=	Birmingham Cooperative Party

INTRODUCTION

This study is about the nature of working-class politics in Birmingham and Sheffield in the thirteen years that followed the ending of the Great War. It is concerned with working-class politics in a two-fold sense: firstly, with the political attitudes and affiliations of the working class as a whole; secondly, with the beliefs and behaviour of that section of the working class which was politically active. These two levels of popular consciousness did not exist in any simple juxtaposition but were part of a gradation of sentiment which stretched from the apolitical and apathetic at one extreme to the convinced and committed at the other. Nevertheless, it is an empirical division as well as a heuristic one and, as such, it provides the essential organising principle of this work. The thesis is divided broadly into two halves: in the first, we examine the major influences which determined the political sympathies of the working class in Birmingham and Sheffield; in the second, we explore the assumptions and activities of their chosen or self-appointed representatives.

We begin in chapter one with a brief account of the historical background to the conditions and events which we describe in the thesis proper. Historical circumstances were to provide the inescapable context of later struggles and, though not comprehensive, it is hoped that the more salient and influential of past developments are summarised in this section. As it is based on secondary literature, the chapter also enables us to survey the historiography of both towns. In the case of Birmingham in particular, the writings on the town's earlier history have heavily influenced the interpretation of its twentieth century evolution.

In the second chapter, we examine the role of work and non-work in the formation of working people's political preferences. Though confined to local evidence and instance, this section inevitably confronts a number of topics which have received more general coverage in the literature

of political science and sociology. Among the major questions tackled are whether small units predisposed their workers to Conservatism, whether trades unionism was a radicalising influence which promoted Labour voting, and whether the experience of unemployment politicised its victims or tended to render them apathetic. It is felt that a close study of these economic factors and others will provide a useful historical dimension to recent discussion on these topics and provide a necessary corrective to the less empirically grounded of later writings.

In the following section, this type of analysis is taken one stage further when we look at the kinds of working-class community which the differing forms of employment and industry tended to generate, and the question is raised as to whether particular forms of working-class community conduced to particular political loyalties. Areas of slum, proletarian and artisanal habitation are identified in Birmingham and Sheffield and discussed, and the section is concluded by an examination of the new residential setting provided by the burgeoning interwar council estates. While our concern is primarily political, this chapter owes much to the sociological literature on these topics and it is hoped that it, in turn, contributes to a deeper understanding of the patterns of working-class life.

Though socio-economic conditions provided the terrain of the political contest, its outcome, in the short term at least, was dependent on human agency. In the final three chapters of the first half of the thesis, we analyse some of the ways in which the political actors of the time influenced the direction of working-class politics. Chapter three describes the rival parties' organisational structures in Birmingham and Sheffield and the scale and impact of their propaganda.

Our understanding of the operation of these local factors is deepened in the following chapter which examines some of the circumstances and events in the field of national economics and government which crucially influenced the dynamics of political partisanship in the 1920s. The economic and

legislative records of the post-war administrations are assessed in terms of their popular reception, and the political meaning and importance of the General Strike is given a coverage commensurate with its role in the evolution of interwar politics.

The first half of the thesis is concluded by a scrutiny of local government. The style of the local parties' rule and their administrative successes and failures were still significant influences on working-class affiliations in our period of research and are given particular weight in this study because of the stark contrast between the character of Birmingham's municipal politics and those of Sheffield.

In the second half of the thesis, we turn our attention towards the nature of working-class political activism. The major party of the British working class was Labour and it, therefore, receives the major share of our coverage - both in its own activities and in its relations with its associates and rivals in the battle for political support.

Chapter seven explores the character of the Labour rank and file's political beliefs and the meaning of their socialism. In contrast to the extensive literature on Labour's governmental record and the thinking of its leaders, little work has been done on the views and aspirations of the Party's ordinary membership. This section is intended to partially redress that balance and, in so doing, correct some of the misconceptions and distortions which have vitiated some of the recent writings on Labour politics which have analysed its history almost entirely in terms of centralised manipulation and betrayal.

The concentration on central organisation and leadership has also encouraged a view of the Labour Party as merely an electoral machine. Surprisingly little work has been done on the interwar period to prove or disprove this assumption. In fact, our research in Birmingham and Sheffield reveals the existence of what may properly be called a Labour subculture of

extra-political associations and activities which gave the Labour Party a far richer group life than has commonly been supposed. Chapter eight seeks to depict this side of the Labour Party's existence and assess its significance for those members who participated.

Cooperation is another neglected theme in the Labour movement's historiography and in chapter nine we analyse the nature of the Cooperative movement's political beliefs and its strained relations with Labour and the trades unions. At the other extreme, stood the parties and groupings of the revolutionary Left. Though small in numbers, they were always active and the following chapter sets out to explore the attitudes and activism of revolutionary politics and the impact they made on the working class as a whole and within the organs of the Labour mainstream.

Last but by no means least, the thesis concludes with an examination of the ideology of working-class Conservatism and a study of the organisational forms to which it gave rise. An important section of the working class has always voted Conservative and they are due as full and sympathetic coverage as is usually accorded to their more radical compatriots. In applying this stricture to our own work, we also appraise the validity and utility of the more recent literature on working-class Conservatism and question some of the assumptions that have usually underlain its treatment.

Each chapter is commenced by a scene-setting introduction and rounded off by a summatory conclusion. The work as a whole is completed by an overall conclusion which tackles some of the issues of determinism and free will implicitly raised in earlier sections and assesses the contribution of this research to the extensive secondary literature on the Labour movement and working-class politics.

Chapter 1

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 Introduction

Birmingham and Sheffield are ancient settlements with their quota of old relics and remains. But the early years of their existence were spent, for the most part, in a respectable obscurity and it was not until the Industrial Revolution that they emerged as leading actors on the historical stage. This opening chapter aims to give a brief introduction to the evolution of both towns, noting in particular those economic and political developments which were to shape their character in the interwar period that is our primary concern. As it was industry that gave Birmingham and Sheffield their strategic roles, we shall examine economic developments first.

1.2 Economic History

Sheffield is a text-book example of the way in which geological and topographical characteristics can determine the siting and growth of human settlement. Its position on the Don and its tributary rivers contained abundant woodland, valley pasture and dry land suitable for building, and offered fording points with access to the communications routes on the nearby high land.[1] Sheffield also contained all the ingredients of a successful iron and steel town. There was iron ore in the vicinity, refractory material for the steel furnaces came from the local ganister and an excellent flux was provided by the dolomite of the local Magnesian Limestone. Charcoal from the neighbouring woodland and, later, coal mined on the eastern edges of the settlement provided the heat whilst,

---

1. D. Linton (ed.), Sheffield and Its Region (Sheffield, 1956), p. 229

for the working of the iron and steel, five steeply-inclined and fast-running rivers were a source of motive power before the coming of steam. Millstone Grit from the surrounding Pennines proved to be a very serviceable grindstone.[1]

Birmingham, at first glance, enjoyed no such obvious advantages. Although South Staffordshire, with its iron ore, limestone, coal and water power, was nearby, other towns were better placed to reap the industrial benefits that these resources provided.[2] Birmingham, though, enjoyed two bonuses: firstly, an abundant supply of pure water; secondly, a central position on a fording point between the mineral and metal area of South Staffordshire and the wealthy agricultural area of Warwickshire at an intermediary point between producer and customer.[3] Through its early role as a local trading centre, Birmingham acquired an industrial and commercial momentum that was to make it the second city of England.

At the time of the Domesday survey, neither Birmingham nor Sheffield were of particular note but the centuries that followed were to lay the foundations of the towns' dynamic growth in the Industrial Revolution. By the 14th. century, Sheffield was already famous for its cutlery and edge tools. Its natural advantages and, subsequently, its position on a through-route to Hull and the high-grade iron ores of Sweden ensured that the smelting of steel and its working became the staple trade of the local economy. By the 16th. century, its population numbered 3000, and the local craftsmen, concerned to safeguard the security of their livelihood and the high reputation of their goods, had banded together to regulate their trade. In 1624, the Company of Cutlers of Hallamshire was granted legal incorporation and the right to control the number of apprentices in the trade - rights

---

1. N. Jameson, 'A Study of Sheffield', Journal of the Manchester Geographical Society, LXVI, (1935-36), pp. 57-58.
2. G.C. Allen, The Industrial Development of Birmingham and the Black Country (1966), p. 24.
3. ibid., pp.28-29; M.J. Wise, 'Some Factors Influencing the Growth of Birmingham', Geography, 33, (1948).

which it retained until the general abolition of guild restrictions in 1814.[1]

In the same period, Birmingham was developing a reputation for the production of generally low quality but useful small metalwares - knives, buckles, nails, swords and a variety of other small metal goods had become the town's stock-in-trade by the 17th. century. In contrast to Sheffield, though, Birmingham grew without guild regulation and the town's freedom of trade attracted many artisans to it who were forbidden or discouraged from working in other areas by restrictive trade practices.[2] By 1700, Birmingham had outstripped Sheffield in size and, at the time of the first census in 1801, the population of Birmingham was almost twice as large as that of Sheffield.[3]

It was the Industrial Revolution that established the salient position of Birmingham and Sheffield in the British economy though it can be argued that the period marked more an acceleration and consolidation of the divergent trends in the two local economies than any new departure. In Sheffield, the embryonic split between the large-scale heavy trades (the steel foundries, rolling mills and heavy engineering works) and the small-scale light trades (producing smaller finished metal articles) became a schism. Initially, it was the growth of the light trades that was the more important; it was their demand that had promoted the early development of Sheffield's steel industry and, in 1850, they employed four times as many workers as were engaged in the heavy industrial sector.[4] Apart from the transition from water to steam power, the production methods of the light

1. Linton (ed.), op. cit., pp. 149-50, p. 172.
2. M.J. Wise (ed.), Birmingham and Its Regional Setting (Birmingham, 1950) pp. 145-156.
3. According to the 1801 Census, Birmingham had a population of 70,670 and Sheffield, 45,755.
4. S. Pollard, A History of Labour in Sheffield (Liverpool, 1959), p. 78.

trades changed little. The trades remained handicraft-based and were marked by a highly complex division of labour, both horizontally by product and vertically by process. There was little or no mechanisation and units of production were small.[1] Nevertheless, the light trades continued to be the major component of the local economy throughout the 19th. century and, in terms of the numbers employed, they continued to expand. In 1841, they employed a total of some 13,669 workers; by 1901, this figure had risen to 23,935.[2]

But their preeminence was slowly being eclipsed by the heavy trades. By 1891, the heavy trades employed two thirds of the total engaged in the cutlery and tool sectors. By 1911, after a phenomenal spurt which had doubled employment in steel and engineering within the space of twenty years, the heavy trades had supplanted the old staple industries of Sheffield as the major employer.[3] The basis of this development lay in Benjamin Huntsman's discovery of the crucible process of manufacturing steel in the 1770s. By 1853, Sheffield contained between 80 and 90 per cent of Great Britain's steel-making capacity.[4] The crucible process, though, did not allow the efficient production of large quantities of steel and the major innovations came with the spread of the Bessemer process in the 1860s and the adoption of the Siemens Martin open hearth furnace in the 1880s. Sheffield made full use of these more efficient and cost-effective processes though its topography and its distance from the cheaper ores meant that it was not advantageously placed for the production of bulk steel. It was able to maintain its reputation as Britain's leading steel producer by its concentration on the production and development of special steels - steel

---

1. G.I.H. Lloyd, The Cutlery Trades (1913), pp. 284-88.
2. ibid., p. 442.
3. Pollard, op. cit., p. 226.
4. R.M. Ledbetter, 'Sheffield's Industrial History from about 1700...' (duplicated typescript, Sheffield City Library, N.D.), p.159.

alloys with particular qualities of hardness, durability or non-oxidation.[1]

The famous companies with which Sheffield is chiefly associated were mainly founded in the mid-century period. They expanded massively in the years leading up to the First World War to meet the demands created by the prospering railway and ship-building industries and the requirements of governments at home and abroad for guns, shell and armour plate. John Browns, established in 1856 with 200 employees, had 5000 on its payroll by 1873; Cammells, employing a 'handful' in 1844, had 4000 workers in 1872.[2] The histories of Vickers (established in 1867), Hadfields (established in 1872) and the other major companies would yield similar stories of growth.

The development of the heavy industries took place almost entirely in the east of Sheffield, along the valley of the Don - the only area where there was sufficient expanse of flat land to enable the siting of the new large-scale works. Around these works developed the new working-class suburbs of Attercliffe, Brightside and Darnall, inhabited principally by the workers of the newly-opened mills and forges. Between 1891 and 1911, the population of Attercliffe and Brightside increased by 40,300.[3] Meanwhile, the light trades and their workers continued to be concentrated in the central districts of the town, thus adding a social and geographical dimension to the already clearly demarcated industrial division of Sheffield.

The story of Birmingham's industrial development is more complex but is similarly one of great expansion. By the beginning of the 19th. century, Birmingham had become a 'thriving manufacturing centre with a broadly based industrial structure'.[4] It was already established as an important local market town and the opening of canals in 1772 and 1790 further enhanced its position as a regional centre and provincial town of some significance.

---

1. R.M. Ledbetter, op. cit., p. 165.
2. Pollard, op. cit., pp. 224-25, p. 162.
3. ibid., p. 185.
4. Wise (ed.), op. cit., p. 179.

Its leading manufactures at this time were guns, small metalwares, jewellery and brassware. Its trades rose and fell. Some products were given up, others were killed by the whims of fashion but, in general, Birmingham contained a range of products and interchangeable skills that made possible rapid adaptation and innovation.[1]

By the 1850s, four sections of Birmingham's diverse economy had established their preeminence - brassware, jewellery, button manufacture and the gun trade. In addition, there were many employers of labour manufacturing pens, bedsteads, wire, screws, edge tools and a great variety of other necessary items of industrial and domestic consumption.[2] One important characteristic that these varied trades shared was that they were nearly all carried on in small units of production. Though Birmingham's industries expanded greatly in the Industrial Revolution, they did so not by mechanisation and large-scale production but by the multiplication of small works. Typical 'Brummagen' products were highly specialised, often ornamental and frequently made out of wrought iron and brass. They were not therefore susceptible of mass production, which required standardised products and easily worked raw materials. The fluctuating demand of many of these items was a further disincentive to costly investment in factory production.[3] There was to be no fundamental change in the nature of any of these industries with the partial exception of the brassware trade. Many firms manufacturing these traditional staples continued to operate the old methods of production until well into the 20th. century.

But fashion and changes in the nature of domestic consumption did take their toll. The jewellery sector continued to expand throughout the 19th. century until its pre-war heyday in the Edwardian era, when up to 50,000 workers were employed directly or indirectly in the trade, nearly

---

1. Wise (ed.), op. cit., pp. 179-81.
2. Allen, op. cit., pp. 50-61.
3. G.C. Allen, 'Methods of Industrial Organisation in the West Midlands, 1860-1927', Economic Journal, Economic History series, 4, (January, 1929), pp. 540-47.

all in small workshops.[1] The arms trade declined as mass production for military purposes developed elsewhere though a small remnant of the industry, manufacturing guns by hand for sporting purposes, survived into the interwar period. Button manufacture continued to employ sizeable numbers but fell in relative importance.

Brassware, alone, was able to effect a partially successful transition to the changed conditions of the 20th. century for it was a material much in demand from the two major new industries that developed in Birmingham from the 1880s onwards - car and cycle manufacture and electrical engineering. Large sections of the brassware industry adapted themselves to produce the components required by the new sectors as the old markets provided by the gas industry and the ornamental tastes of the Victorians declined. They did so, however, by standardisation, specialisation and an increased scale of production.[2]

In this, they followed the pattern set by the two new industries of Birmingham, both of which were based on mass production in factories. The large number of firms engaged in the manufacture of cars and cycles was gradually whittled down before the First World War to a few major companies manufacturing completed products and those smaller firms concentrating on the manufacture of specific components. By 1911, it was calculated that there were 14,750 workers involved in the car and cycle trade in Birmingham.[3] In addition, there were many more (such as the 4000 workers at Dunlops) whose livelihood was indirectly dependent on the prosperity of the local motor industry.[4]

Electrical engineering, dominated by the firms of GEC and Lucas, was another industry whose expansion, begun in the years preceding the War, was

---

1. J.C. Roche, 'The History, Development and Organisation of the Birmingham Jewellery and Allied Trades', M. Comm. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1927, p.49.
2. Allen, op. cit. (1966), p. 292.
3. ibid., p. 296, p. 298.
4. A. Briggs, History of Birmingham. Vol. II, Borough and City, 1865-1938 (1952), p. 54.

to continue through the interwar period. Aided by the presence of subsidiary manufacturers and a pool of labour with the requisite manual skills, the trade expanded rapidly to employ some 6000 workers by 1911.[1]

The economy of Birmingham was being transformed in the years preceding the War but it was not until the 1920s that the magnitude of the new trades' impact on the local industrial structure became clear. By contrast, in Sheffield the rise of the heavy industries had already fundamentally altered the balance of the local economy. The consequences of these transitions for both towns will be examined more closely in the following chapter.

1.3 Political History

What we might term 'modern' politics - the movement for democracy and political reform - first emerged in Britain at the end of the 18th. century. It was the French Revolution that initially stirred the artisans of Sheffield, giving focus and impetus to their growing discontent with the depredations of an increasingly strong mercantile capitalism. In the 1790s, Sheffield was a centre of popular disturbance and political agitation second to none - in 1792, the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information had over 2000 members, a higher membership than the London branch.[2]

Birmingham, a town very similar to Sheffield in economic and social structure, failed to emulate the example of its northern counterpart. The Birmingham Society for Constitutional Information achieved little popular impact. In fact, its leadership, addicted to high-sounding phrases but tremulous in action, lived in fear of a recurrence of the famous Priestly Riots of 1791. The Church and King mob's attack on the leaders of

---

1. Allen, op. cit. (1966), p. 313.
2. F.K. Donnelly, J.L. Baxter, 'Sheffield and the English Revolutionary Tradition', in S. Pollard, C. Holmes (eds), Essays in the Economic and Social History of South Yorkshire (1976), pp. 91-92

Birmingham's radical bourgeoisie on that occasion was to draw the teeth of the reform movement in Birmingham for several years to come.[1] Sheffield, on the other hand, was one of the few large cities not troubled by the supporters of Church and King.[2]

On the surface, it is difficult to explain this contrast between the two towns given their many similarities. John Money has concluded that its explanation lies in Birmingham's successful adaptation to a sense of regional identity in the previous thirty years. By its participation in the Warwickshire election of 1774 and its influence on the surrounding county boroughs (when it, of course, was unrepresented in parliament), Birmingham had forged 'a tradition of popular but orderly participation, embracing all levels of the community'.[3] Whilst the artisans of Sheffield were almost forced into a recognition of their separate and antagonistic interests by the neglect (or worse) of a wider society, the middle classes of Birmingham and the county gentry had promoted a working compromise which enabled the assimilation of urban with rural values and helped establish a sense of regional community.

It is tempting to extend this argument forwards to the 1830s when Birmingham was in the van of popular agitation for political reform. The Birmingham Political Union was an organisation uniting middle and working class in the agitation for the reform of parliament and a wider suffrage; its leader, Thomas Attwood, constantly stressed the shared interests of both classes and the necessity of cooperation to achieve their shared goals.[4] In Birmingham, such arguments were not entirely implausible - the predominance of the small workshop, the lack of mechanisation, the relative affluence of the local workforce and the marked social mobility of the

---

1. J. Money, Experience and Identity: Birmingham and the West Midlands, 1760-1800 (Manchester, 1977), p. 236.
2. E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 82.
3. Money, op. cit., p. 283.
4. A. Briggs, 'Thomas Attwood and the Economic Background of the Birmingham Political Union', Cambridge Historical Journal, 2, (1948).

local community, combined with a shared liability to economic misfortune, weakened impulses to class antagonism.[1] Most historians of 19th. century Birmingham have explained the town's much vaunted traditions of class collaboration and harmony by such circumstances. The more recent work of Clive Behagg has refined our interpretation; he has shown that the imposition of a capitalist rationality was certainly not dependent on the operation of a fully-fledged factory system and has demonstrated the reality of class conflict in Birmingham in the first half of the 19th. century.[2] Nevertheless, though overstated, the arguments of the earlier explanations should not be completely abandoned and it remains true that the middle-class leaders of Birmingham were more steadfast in the cause of reform and more willing to enlist the aid of their working-class fellow-townsmen than many of their compatriots elsewhere.

The Birmingham Political Union was re-established in 1837 to agitate for universal manhood suffrage, and it was the Union that instigated the petition campaign which culminated in the Chartist National Convention of 1839. It was at this point that the famed class harmony of Birmingham broke down. The middle-class radicals were unable to accept the more aggressive posture and rhetoric of Chartism's national leadership whilst an indigenous working-class leadership had emerged in Birmingham which scorned their pusillanimity.[3] A burst of trade union activity in the mid-1830s had perhaps helped prepare the economic basis of this political cleavage.[4] The high-water mark of the split came with the Bull Ring riots (July, 1839) and their aftermath. The use of the London police and the

1. A. Briggs, Victorian Cities (1963), pp. 188-89 and 'The Background of the Parliamentary Reform Movement in Three English Cities', Cambridge Historical Journal, 3, (1952), pp. 297-98.
2. C. Behagg, 'Custom, Class and Cleavage: the Trade Societies of Birmingham', Social History, 4, 3, (1979).
3. T. Tholfsen, 'The Chartist Crisis in Birmingham', International Review of Social History, III, (1958), pp. 462-68.
4. Behagg, op. cit., p. 473.

arrest of several Chartist leaders at the behest of the Liberal mayor seemed to confirm beliefs amongst working-class radicals of middle-class treachery.

But the split did not develop further. There were no insurrectionary attempts in Birmingham; rather, there was a swift transition to a more moderate and self-consciously respectable movement of reform. The Christian Chartists were influential in Birmingham and there was even some success in re-establishing class cooperation in Joseph Sturges' Complete Suffrage Union , founded in 1842. It has been argued that this rapprochement:[1]

> reflected the deeper harmony of a well-integrated culture in which masters and artisans of a small workshop economy shared a commitment to the social and moral values of the community.

This is a somewhat elegaic and exaggerated point of view. Artisans in Birmingham were workers who naturally possessed economic and political grievances against their employers and their impulse to respectability should be understood as an assertion of self-respect, not a fawning emulation of their social superiors. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the middle class of Birmingham, by their genuine commitment to a significant degree of political reform and their willingness to involve the working class in a cross-class campaign, attained a moral legitimacy in the eyes of the workers of Birmingham that they had forfeited elsewhere. Where workers were in trades being slowly killed by mechanical competition, or where they were already enrolled into the harsh regime of the factory, this legitimacy had been sacrificed on the altar of laissez-faire. In Birmingham, for all the town was suffering the growth of the capitalist rationale even in its smaller workshops, this clash of economic interests had not yet become the determining factor in the nature of class relations.

Neither had it in Sheffield, and a broad similarity of political trajectory is apparent in the 1830s and 1840s. There had been strong class cooperation in the agitation leading up to the 1832 Reform Act, a brief pause in its aftermath, and a revival of political agitation in the

---

1. Tholfsen, op. cit., p. 461.

late 1830s. In December, 1837, the Sheffield Working Men's Association had been founded with the support of the local middle-class radicals but, as in Birmingham, the Chartist upsurge of 1839 created a schism between middle- and working-class reformers as the former were eclipsed by the more far-reaching and class-conscious demands of Chartism's national and local leadership.[1] Indeed, in the bitterness of 1840, after the failure of the National Convention, there was even some move to insurrectionism. In January, some 50 local Chartists arose in what they hoped would be the prelude to a national uprising. They failed miserably and, clearly, this must be seen as very much a minority current with little, if any, support from the organised workers of Sheffield.[2] Attempts to heal class divisions in 1842 with the establishment of a local branch of the Complete Suffrage Union were to prove abortive though.

But by 1848 the wheel had turned full circle. The small masters and manufacturers re-entered radical politics with a vengeance and local Chartism became a vehicle for their political and economic ideology. The local artisans supported the new politics insofar as it coincided with their own beliefs and aspirations but they were unable to influence matters where their own interests and those of the middle-class politicians stood opposed. The strength of this radical bloc was such that by 1849 Chartist representatives formed a majority of the elected council though they remained in a minority overall. The Council, in its corporate capacity, supported several motions for parliamentary reform, including one in 1851 for manhood suffrage, the ballot and triennial parliaments.[3]

In the period before the First World War, middle-class leadership in politics was the norm but it took markedly different forms. While

---

1. Pollard, op. cit., pp.41-47.
2. J.L. Baxter, 'Early Chartism and the Labour Class Struggle: South Yorkshire, 1837-1840' in Pollard and Holmes (eds), op. cit, pp.147-51.
3. Pollard, op. cit., pp. 48-49.

Birmingham became famous or, in some quarters, notorious for its radical civic leadership and municipal reforms, Sheffield Council was content for the most part to avoid grand schemes and it concentrated on the unglamorous business of saving the ratepayers' money. The difference was personified in the character of Joseph Chamberlain - a figure who, though he withdrew from municipal politics in 1876, continued to dominate the Birmingham political scene until his death in 1914. Indeed, his influence was to survive even this critical juncture and posthumously he shaped the nature of Birmingham politics right up to the Second World War.

Firstly, though, Chamberlain should be placed in context for he was the inheritor and main proponent of a philosophy and ethos that had been developing in Birmingham since the 1850s. George Dawson, minister of the Mount Zion chapel, was Chamberlain's John the Baptist. Dawson preached a gospel of civic service and municipal initiative. He believed in the duties of an active citizenry and saw the municipal sphere as the rightful place for these improving and self-improving motives to be acted out. 'A town is a solemn organism, through which shall flow and in which shall be shaped, all the highest, loftiest and truest ends of man's moral nature', he proclaimed.[1]

However, more material impulses were needed to transform this pious exhortation into concrete action. One such was the desire for Liberal parliamentary representation. In 1865, the Birmingham Liberal Association was established; in 1868, it was re-formed into the Birmingham Caucus by which the popular electorate was mobilised, through the carefully organised use of their two votes, into returning three Liberal M.P.s.. The Caucus enrolled a mass membership and claimed democratic credentials though the form of democracy that it practised was of a strictly Leninist type - from the top downwards.[2] At this juncture, the radical, nonconformist bourgeoisie of Birmingham was insurgent. It had successfully

---

1. Quoted in Briggs, op. cit. (1963), p. 199.
2. Briggs, op. cit. (1952), pp. 168-69.

led the local agitation for the 1867 Reform Act with considerable working-class support, it was leading the movement for educational reform in the National Education League, and it was the prime mover in the foundation of the National Liberal Federation in 1877.[1] With Dawson's sermons ringing in their ears, it was not surprising that the humble arena of municipal government seemed to offer another opportunity for their talents. The influx of large businessmen in the 1860s and 1870s effected a crucial change in the composition and policies of Birmingham Town Council. The cautious and penny-pinching administrators of the lower middle class were overwhelmed by an energetic group of manufacturers and professionals with the self-confidence and business ability to implement successfully a number of long overdue reforms.[2]

Joseph Chamberlain was elected to the Council in 1869. He was chosen as mayor in 1873 and retained this position until 1876 when he resigned from the Council on becoming M.P. for West Birmingham. His major achievements were to municipalise the gas and water undertakings and to inaugurate the Corporation Street Improvement Scheme. These were worthy reforms and, along with the increased health surveillance brought about by the establishment of a Health Committee in 1875, they did a little to improve the lives of Birmingham's working-class inhabitants.[3] They were not, however, truly innovatory nor did they substantially ameliorate working-class conditions; the reason that they attracted such attention lay in the personality of Chamberlain himself. He invested his efficient and business-like direction of the Council with a moral purpose and

---

1. F. Herrick, 'The Origins of the National Liberal Federation', Journal of Modern History, 2, (1965).
2. E.P. Hennock, 'Finance and Politics in Urban Local Government in England, 1835-1900', Historical Journal, VI, 2, (1963); and 'The Social Composition of Borough Councils in Two Large Cities, 1835-1914' in H.J. Dyos (ed.) The Study of Urban History (1968).
3. Briggs, op. cit. (1952), pp. 168-69.

inflated the apparent magnitude of the reforms by the power of his own ego. Chamberlain had charisma; he inspired devotion and, in equal measure, hatred but he could not be ignored.

Whilst Birmingham Town Council was dominated by Chamberlain and the town's other leading businessmen, the personnel of the Sheffield Council was more modest and its abilities correspondingly less. In fact, whereas the Birmingham bourgeoisie was successfully supplanting the pretensions to aristocratic influence of the Calthorpe family, the Sheffield middle class was still somewhat in awe of their powerful local nobility.[1] Neither was the Council able to achieve the leading role in civic life that the legislature of Birmingham had assumed with such authority. Sheffield's equivalent to George Dawson was Isaac Ironside who, during the Chartists' brief domination of Sheffield Council, had actively promoted a practice of highly localised democracy in the form of 'ward motes'. The functioning of such a system illustrates the degree to which political life in Sheffield was still focussed on the neighbourhood rather than the city.[2]

Another problem for the Sheffield middle class was the recalcitrant behaviour of the local working class. The trade unions were strongly entrenched in a local economy in which capital was a factor of relative insignificance. Rather, it was the skills and experience of the workforce that were crucial and this, allied with the absence of external competition to the local manufactures, enabled a tightly-organised and cohesive artisanate to wield considerable power. Though sectionalised, the trade unions of Sheffield were united by a set of economic and social values quite opposed to the prevailing Liberal free trade orthodoxies of the day. The Sheffield trades societies believed that trades should be regulated

---

1. D. Cannadine, 'The Calthorpe Family in Birmingham, 1810-1910: A "Conservative Interest" Examined', Historical Journal, XVII, 4, (1975). D. Smith, Conflict and Compromise. Class Formation in English Society, 1830-1914 (1982), p. 27, p. 77.
2. Smith, op. cit., pp. 75-79.

in such a way as to guarantee the livelihoods of those who worked in them - a belief fostered by the earlier practice of the Company of Cutlers. On the Government's abdication of these responsibilities by its abolition of guild regulations in 1814, they undertook these regulatory functions themselves.[1]

Physical reprisals against those who refused to join the appropriate trade society or who worked at below approved rates were a common occurrence, and one particular incident - a gun powder attack on a saw grinder in 1866 - attracted national publicity. Respectable opinion was shocked by the so-called Sheffield Outrages and many local trade union leaders hastened to join in the condemnatory chorus. In reality, as the investigating Royal Commission discovered, the chief instigator of the attack was William Broadhead (treasurer of the Sheffield Association of Organised Trades) and a total of twelve local unions were implicated in the use of violent methods to enforce trade sanctions.[2] Amongst the artisans of Sheffield, there was a widespread belief that trade societies did indeed have the right to safeguard the livelihood and conditions of their members in this way.

The weakness of the trades unions in Birmingham caused them to seek security in collaboration with the employers rather than confrontation. The most important manifestation of this tendency was the network of Industrial Alliances that arose in the 1890s. This was a system by which the manufacturers of a particular item joined together and agreed to operate a single price list, uniform wage rates and a ban on strikes. For their part, the workers of the trade in question were offered a closed shop, a sliding scale and bonus system, and a guarantee that wages should not be reduced should selling prices fall. The Bedstead Alliance was the first established (in 1891), to be followed by similar pacts in the mattress, rope, rolled metal, coffin furniture and other trades. At their peak, it

---

1. S. Pollard, 'The Ethics of the Sheffield Outrages', Transactions of the Hunter Archaeological Society, VII, (1953-54).
2. Pollard, op. cit. (1959), pp. 152-58.

was calculated that the Alliances covered some 500 masters and 20,000 men.[1] By 1901, they had foundered on the insuperable difficulties posed by the differences between large and small manufacturers, the uncontrolled competition of newly-established manufacturers and the high bureaucratic costs of their operation. Nevertheless, as an experiment in collaborationist industrial relations, the Alliances are probably unsurpassed in British economic history.[2]

It has also been argued that the working-class community of Sheffield was sociologically less susceptible to middle-class influence than that of Birmingham. In the Midlands town, the trade unions had been unable to resist mechanisation and the employment of female labour and had chosen to accept the reality of a reasonable family income rather than the ideal of the male breadwinner.[3] To some extent, the artisans of Birmingham had diverted their energies to politics where they could feel a genuine sense of participation and, through the abilities of their local middle-class leaders, a real belief in the efficacy of their actions. In contrast, the artisans of Sheffield had resisted, with not a little success, encroachments on their traditional working practices and retained strong loyalties to their particular trade. Theirs was a more self-sufficient and enclosed community in which the degree of involvement in city-wide or cross-class organisations was correspondingly less. This, essentially, is the argument put forward by Dennis Smith in his comparative study of Birmingham and Sheffield between 1830 and 1914 which is summed up in the following passage:[4]

> In Birmingham the habit of participating in formal associations... was much more highly developed [than in Sheffield]. A complex web of institutional bonds in the educational, political, religious and industrial spheres provided a framework of interaction which was more susceptible to subtle adjustments in power and opinion than the encompassing particularism of Sheffield. The commitment

---

1. Allen, op. cit. (1966), p. 365.
2. ibid., pp. 365-68; R.A. Church, B. Smith, 'Competition and Monopoly in the Coffin Furniture Industry, 1870-1915', Economic History Review, XIX, 3, (1966).
3. P.R. Shergold, Working-Class Life. The "American Standard" in Perspective 1899-1913 (Pittsburgh, 1982), ch. 4.
4. Smith, op. cit., p. 256.

> of members of working-class families in Birmingham to a plurality of occupational spheres weakened the capacity and will to resist innovations promoted by larger employers. However, their involvement in political and welfare organisations alongside leading businessmen and professionals gave artisan inhabitants a sense of participation in the management of social reform.

In political terms, the hold of Joseph Chamberlain on his working-class reformers was shown in a dramatic way by the events of 1886 . In that year, Chamberlain resigned from Gladstone's Government in protest at the Liberal prime minister's policy of home rule for Ireland. Chamberlain became the leader of the Liberal Unionists who gradually but unerringly drew closer to their erstwhile Conservative opponents until, in Birmingham in 1890, a joint committee was established to deal with matters of common concern. Five years later, Chamberlain became Colonial Secretary in Salisbury's Conservative Government. Chamberlain did not desert the cause of social reform but henceforth it was to be found in curious admixture with his new-found enthusiasms for Empire development and tariff reform. Remarkably, throughout this quixotic progress up to his death in 1914, even in the Liberal landslide of 1906, Joseph Chamberlain retained the support of the large majority of those in Birmingham who had, like him, previously been Liberals. Haute bourgeois defections from the Liberals to the Conservatives were not uncommon at this time but Birmingham was the only place where a substantial section of the lower middle and artisanal classes similarly transferred their loyalties.[1]

Local economic difficulties caused by the rise of foreign competition to the area's traditional industries and an increased interest in the benefits of Protection may partly explain the rise of working-class Unionism.[2] It has also been argued that the Liberal working-class vote had been undermined in the central wards by disillusionment with the Liberal municipal programme which had brought few concrete advantages and the growth of a populist Conservatism willing and able to harness these grievances. In this

---

1. P.C. Griffiths, 'The Caucus and the Liberal Party in 1886', History, 62, 2, (1973).
2. R. Jay, Joseph Chamberlain. A Political Study (Oxford, 1981), p. 160.

perspective, Chamberlain's Unionism is seen as a cloak of principle to conceal an opportunist move for political survival.[1] However, while both these arguments have elements of truth, it is the uniqueness of Birmingham and its mass working-class Unionism that must be stressed. The additional element of the political-class equation of Birmingham was Joseph Chamberlain himself. Though assisted by a heritage of middle-class political leadership and a local economic structure still broadly conducive to class collaboration, it was by the vision, will and abilities of Chamberlain himself that Birmingham was transformed into the 'Mecca of Unionism'. Chamberlain founded a Unionist social and political hegemony in the city on the basis of his own personality, an efficient electoral machine, a blatantly partisan press, and a host of social institutions (such as the Territorials, the boys' associations, the pubs) which helped instil a 'patriotic' and Conservative world-view into their clients.[2] None but Conservative and Unionist M.P.s were returned for Birmingham constituencies between 1886 and 1918.

Sheffield was more variegated in its politics and more typical. It too had a core of working-class Conservatism based on the workers of the light trades who were suffering, like those of Birmingham, from degraded conditions and foreign competition. These were concentrated in the central wards of the town - the Central Division was represented by Sir Howard Vincent a prominent Conservative Protectionist from 1885 to 1908. The Park constituency was unusual in that it was a predominantly mining division with strong Conservative sympathies. Here, the local influence of the Duke of Norfolk appears to have been a determining factor. The East End, however, populated mainly by steel workers, was principally Liberal or Lib-Lab and in this area the major threat to Liberalism came not from Unionism but from Independent Labour. By 1914, this was a threat

---

1. C. Green, 'Birmingham Politics, 1873-1891. The Local Basis of Change', Midland History, 2, 2, (1973).
2. D. Blanch, 'Nation, Empire and the Birmingham Working Class, 1899-1914', Ph. D. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1975, chs. 5-10.

assuming form.[1] The emergence of Labour as an independent force and the eclipse of the Lib-Labs was a slowly fermented process but in Sheffield it occurred with unique clarity.

The first branch of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in Sheffield was established in 1893. One year later, there were four branches with a combined membership of some 400.[2] In the same year, there was an important parliamentary by-election in Attercliffe in which the Liberals, by passing over the claims of a Lib-Lab working-man candidate (supported by the Sheffield Federated Trades Council) in favour of a local saw-mill owner, conspicuously failed to assist their cause. The ILP stepped in to field its own candidate, one Frank Smith whom we shall meet again, who narrowly received the endorsement of the Trades Council and gained a respectable 1249 votes in the election itself though coming at the bottom of the poll. The effects of the controversy at the time were not dramatic (except insofar as they persuaded Ramsay MacDonald to throw in his lot definitely with the ILP) but they were a clear harbinger of things to come.[3]

Gradually the supporters of independent Labour representation and the Lib-Labs became increasingly polarised in their loyalties. Moreover, this political split had a clear economic and even geographical basis for the supporters of independent Labour came predominantly from the steel and heavy engineering sectors of the East End while the staunchest Lib-Labs came almost entirely from the light trades of the central wards.[4] (Though the poorer inhabitants of the central wards might vote Conservative, the respectable trades unionists of the area were adherents of the Liberal Party.

---

1. H. Mathers, 'Sheffield Municipal Politics, 1893-1926. Parties, Personalities and the Rise of Labour', Ph. D. thesis, University of Sheffield, 1979, chs. 3-5.
2. ibid., pp. 158-59.
3. J. Brown, 'Attercliffe, 1894: How One Local Liberal Party Failed to Meet the Challenge of Labour', Journal of British Studies, XIV, 2, (May, 1975).
4. J. Mendelson et al, Sheffield Trades and Labour Council, 1858-1958, (Sheffield, N.D.), pp. 46-48.

The Sheffield Federated Trades and Labour Council became the focus of this conflict. Hitherto dominated by the workers of the cutlery and allied trades, the Trades Council was transformed by the onset of mass unionism amongst the workers of the East End in the late 1880s and early 1890s. In 1902-1903, the Sheffield Federated Trades Council comprised 29 branches of the light trades, 32 of the heavy and 43 others, but this changing balance had not found reflection in the Executive Committee where the heavy trades had just two representatives compared to the seven of the light.[1]

National events cast their own shadow over Sheffield with the establishment of the Labour Representation Committee (later renamed the Labour Party) in London in 1900. A Sheffield branch of the Committee - whose role was to unite trades unionist and political supporters of independent Labour representation behind the running of their own candidates - was founded in 1903 with an Executive Committee composed of nine representatives of the heavy trades, two from the light and seven from the transport and general unions.[2] The Federated Trades Council refused to associate with it and a compromise whereby Lib-Lab and Labour councillors were to act autonomously on questions concerning labour whilst being allowed to cooperate with the middle-class parties on other topics broke down almost immediately. Events reached their logical conclusion when, in May, 1907, the Labour Representation Committee voted to rename itself the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council and undertook to carry out industrial functions. Thenceforth, until their reunification in 1920, the Sheffield working class was represented by two trades councils.

The Sheffield Federated Trades Council continued to be directed by the Lib-Labs of the light trades; it was moderate and conciliatory and adopted a strongly 'patriotic' viewpoint during the First World War. It was also stagnant and old-fashioned and it saw its membership and influence

---

1. Mendelson et al, op. cit., p. 47.
2. ibid., p. 49.

continuously decline. The Sheffield Trades and Labour Council, on the other hand, committed to independent Labour and socialist representation, comprising principally the workers of the heavy trades and other well-organised sectors such as the railwaymen, tramwaymen, and gasworkers, was younger in personnel and more aggressive in stance. Under the influence of the War, it was to become radically anti-militarist, even revolutionary, in outlook. At the time of the establishment of the combined Sheffield Federated Trades and Labour Council in 1920, the Trades and labour Council had some 60,000 affiliated members and the Federated Trades Council just 18,256.[1]

The strength of Sheffield's Lib-Labs delayed the election of the town's first independent Labour councillor until 1905 when R.G. Murray (ILP and Gasworkers) was returned for Brightside. But Labour made a bigger splash in 1909 when it secured the return of Joseph Pointer as M.P. for Attercliffe in a four-cornered contest. Pointer retained his seat in both elections of 1910, assisted by the withdrawal of the Liberal candidate.

Events in Birmingham were less dramatic and less clear-cut. Here, Labour was fighting not just Lib-Labism but a powerful populist Unionism. Nevertheless, so far as the early proponents of independent Labour representation were concerned, the first enemies to be overcome were the Liberals. Both the Birmingham Trades Council and the Birmingham Liberal Party vacillated in their attitudes towards claims for Labour representation. At times, the Liberals made some effort to run working-class candidates but they made few concessions in terms of policy. Their high-minded preoccupation with the temperance and Irish Home Rule issues held little attraction for working-class voters and they soon found themselves under attack from the ILP and Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in the struggle for municipal honours. In 1897, Robert Toller, a leader of the Gasworkers,

---

1. Mendelson et al, op. cit., chs. 5-6; for membership statistics see SDT, 31;3;1920.

was returned as Labour councillor for Saltley ward. In 1901, Birmingham Trades Council became the first major council to affiliate to the national Labour Representation Committee. However, despite this commitment, the Council continued to waver in its attitude towards the competing claims of the Liberal and Labour Parties and its interest in Labour representation remained pragmatic rather than ideological.[1]

But increasingly, in municipal and parliamentary elections, candidates standing under Labour auspices were polling better than middle-class Liberals or even Lib-Labs. In 1906, a Labour candidate came within only 600 votes of defeating the Unionist M.P. for East Birmingham and it seemed as if only the mystique of Chamberlain prevented the loss of the seat.[2] More generally, there was a gradual accretion of Labour support in the Trades Council as in the electorate as a whole as the Party came to be seen as a more effective exponent of working-class concerns than the chronically weak and electorally impotent local Liberals. the Liberals were increasingly marginalised by Chamberlain's clever playing of the social reform, protectionist and imperialist cards, and by their own timorousness and inadequacy in protecting and propounding the interests of their working-class supporters.[3] New Liberalism came too late to save the Liberals of Birmingham who had already been disastrously weakened by the events of 1886. In any event, the shots fired by Gavrilo Princip at Sarajevo were to seal their fate.

---

1. A. Wright, 'Liberal Party Organisation and Politics in Birmingham, Coventry and Wolverhampton, 1886-1914', Ph. D. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1977, p. 173, pp. 344-45.
2. S. Roberts, 'Politics and the Birmingham Working Class: the General Elections of 1900 and 1906 in East Birmingham', West Midlands Studies, 15, (Winter, 1982).
3. Wright, op. cit., pp. 385-92.

1.4 The First World War

During the Great War, the factories of Birmingham and Sheffield vied in their zeal to produce the agents of death and destruction. Sir John French described the War as 'a struggle between Krupps and Birmingham'; Sheffield claimed to be 'the Arsenal of the World'.[1] The statistics are staggering. During the War, Hadfields alone manufactured 3½m. shells while Sheffield in general was producing 90 per cent of the armour plate used by British shipping and 70 per cent of all munitions produced by private firms in Great Britain.[2] Birmingham industry turned over en masse to the requirements of war - by 1918, Kynochs was producing some 29,750,000 cartridges weekly, the Birmingham Small Arms Company some 100,000 rifles weekly. The district as a whole was responsible for the manufacture of some 15m. shells during the War which some statistical genius calculated would have filled an unbroken line of ten ton railway trucks stretching from Birmingham to Bournemouth.[3] This might, perhaps, have been the best place for them.

Such production was naturally accompanied by considerable upheaval and change. In Sheffield, some £3m. was spent on over 2000 extensions to its steel and engineering works.[4] In Birmingham, all the rationalising and standardising trends of the previous thirty years were speeded up, mechanisation and the use of electricity increased everywhere, and mass production became the overriding imperative.[5] The corollary of the change-over to war production was a massive change in working practices - in particular, an intensification of work and a 'dilution' of labour by the

---

1. Quoted in Briggs, op. cit. (1952), p. 225.
2. Empire Mail and Overseas Trade, Febraury, 1927, p. 138.
   Anon., Sheffield. The Arsenal of the World (Sheffield, 1916), pp. 11-17.
3. R.H. Brazier, E. Sandford, Birmingham and the Great War, 1914-1919 (Birmingham, 1921), pp. 124-127.
4. Pollard, op. cit. (1959), p. 270.
5. Allen, op. cit. (1966), p. 374, pp. 414-17.

ever-widening use of female and semi-skilled workers in jobs that were previously the prerogative of skilled male workers.

It was primarily the issue of dilution and the conscription of skille engineers to the armed forces that made Sheffield a centre of popular disturbance during the War. Alienated from a compliant trade union officialdom, the workers of Sheffield established a new militant leadership based on working shop stewards and joint factory committees. Arising in ad hoc fashion, these new structures of working-class representation were erected into a revolutionary theory by the leading Sheffield activist, J.T. Murphy.[1] The effectiveness of these bodies in mobilising the skilled workers of Sheffield was demonstrated by strikes, total and solid, against call-up and dilution in November, 1916 and May, 1917. But the militancy of Sheffield workers went beyond the defence of obsolete craft privilege in December, 1917 when the shop stewards' movement embraced nearly all the factory workers in the town, skilled and unskilled alike, in a general wages movement and strike.[2]

Moreover, the ever-rising toll of casualties on the Western Front and the food shortages, inflation and loss of civil rights at home created a war weariness that, in some, became a radical anti-militarism. To many in this mood, the October Revolution in Russia was something to be admired, to a few it demanded emulation. The shop stewards' movement was one focus of these feelings, the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council was another. By early 1917, the pro-war members of the Trades and Labour Council were in a small minority and the Council regularly pronounced in favour of a negotiated peace, against the policies of the Government, and, more radically, against the contemporary ruling class and the political and economic system that sustained it. The historians of the Trades Council

1. J.T. Murphy, The Workers' Committee. An Outline of Its Principles and Structure (1917).
2. J. Hinton, The First Shop Stewards' Movement (1973), pp. 175-76, 200-07, 245-48.

are justified in concluding that:[1]

> From 1917 on, it is not too much to say that the leaders of Sheffield labour considered themselves to be at war with their own Government, critical of almost every single one of its actions, hostile to almost all of its intentions, groping towards an almost treasonable loyalty towards the international socialist movement instead of the Government of their own country.

Such self-conscious and ideologically defined radicalism did not extend deeply into the working class as a whole. Disgruntlement with contemporary constraints and antipathy towards the situation and the authorities that imposed them were the dominant sentiments. Nevertheless, insofar as a militant working-class leadership was acting, for once, not in isolation from its supposed followers but was giving their more inchoate dissatisfactions focus and presence, and insofar as these dissatisfactions were directed against the Government of the day and the system over which it presided, the War was a radicalising experience for a large part of the Sheffield working class.

Birmingham, though hardly the political and industrial storm-centre that Sheffield was, shows points of similarity. A shop stewards' movement arose for the same reasons as that in Sheffield but it was more weakly-based and correspondingly less militant. The Austin works at Longbridge were its principal base and the scene of large-scale strikes in June and July, 1918.[2] Another, more widely spread, strike occurred in July, 1918 when some 15,000 Birmingham workers struck against the new system of Government embargoes that confined the employment of skilled workers to specified factories.[3] But, in general, the shop stewards' movement made liitle impact in Birmingham.

There were a number of reasons for this. One of them was that Birmingham was not, to the same extent as Sheffield, a centre of heavy

---

1. Mendelson et al, op.cit., p. 67.
2. R.A. Church, Herbert Austin. The British Motor Car Industry to 1941 (1979), p. 149.
3. Hinton, op. cit., pp. 227-29, 231-32.

engineering in steel (the area in which the Amalgamated Society of Enginee the principal base of the shop stewards' movement - was strongest). The Birmingham metal-working trades concentrated on iron and, more importantly brass. The latter was an industry modernising only slowly in which the workers were organised by the conservative National Society of Brass and Metal Mechanics whose president, W.J. Davis, was a leading trade unionist supporter of the War. Another reason lay in the deskilling of the local engineering workforce that had taken place before the War. It was amongst the semi-skilled workers of the Midlands engineering factories that the Workers' Union had concentrated its burgeoning membership before 1914, and the Union expanded to an even greater degree as it enrolled the newly-recruited semi-skilled workers and dilutees of the war-time boom.[1] The president and Midlands organiser of the Workers' Union, John Beard, was another staunch trade union 'patriot'. What was becoming the most importa part of Birmingham's engineering industry - the car and cycle trade - was newly-established and made use of the most up-to-date techniques of factor based mass production; its craftsmen were few, weakly placed and continua prey to innovations in production methods.[2] In contrast to Sheffield, there was no firmly-anchored trades union organisation able or willing to compete with the claims to power of the ruling forces in society.

Nor was Birmingham Trades Council radicalised to the same extent as its Sheffield equivalent by the experience of war. Indeed, several leadin Birmingham trades unionists, including John Beard and Eldred Hallas (of the Gasworkers), who had been militant socialists before the War, became jingoistic supporters of the war effort. Friction arose within the Counc with those who were less enamoured of the War, and was heightened as the effects of the War at home aroused working-class discontent. The Trades

1. R. Hyman, The Workers' Union (Oxford, 1971), chs. 2-4.
2. Hinton, op. cit., p. 234, pp. 332-35.

Council took a leading role in national campaigns for effective food rationing and rent control. These antagonisms widened into a split on the issue of conscription where the anti-conscriptionists were in a narrow majority. [1] Feelings grew embittered and eventually, in June, 1918, the trade unionist patriots of Birmingham, led by Beard, Hallas and Davis, seceded to establish the Birmingham and District Trade Union Industrial Council which was to be run on 'entirely non-political lines for the specifi purpose of safeguarding and promoting Trade Union interests'.[2]

It is difficult to gauge the numerical significance of the split - the Trade Union Industrial Council's claim of 100,000 members to the Trades Council's 20,000 is clearly propagandistic.[3] Certainly, there were a numbe of secessions (notably fron the Brassworkers, the Jewellery Workers and several Workers' Union branches) but these were outnumbered by new affiliations to the Trades Council.[4] It seems fair to conclude that the Trades Council remained the principal and more legitimate expression of organised labour in the eyes of most Birmingham trades unionists. It was, after all, the pro-war section that had defected, and the commitment of the Trade Union Industrial Council to the war effort reduced the scope of the action it could take even in what it claimed was its principal concern - the defence of workers' organisation and conditions of labour. In any case, the conclusion of the War just five months after its foundation made the Trade Union Industrial Council seem increasingly anachronistic and though it lingered on for several years to come, it was isolated and ineffective and made little impact on popular consciousness.

---

1. J. Corbett, The Birmingham Trades Council, 1866-1966 (1966), pp. 107-13
2. ibid., pp. 114-15. Quoted from a leaflet issued by the Trade Union Industrial Council.
3. NSBMM, Quarterly Journal, January, 1919.
4. BTC Annual Report, 1918, p. 8.

1.5. Conclusion

Having reached November, 1918, we are now able to embark on the main body of the thesis. The histories of Birmingham and Sheffield marked them apart from each other and from other comparable cities, and must inevitably form part of the explanation of the differences in their interwar politics. In this chapter, we have sought to isolate and describe those historical circumstances which appear, to this writer and others, to have most strongly influenced the direction of later developments. Many of the themes and topics touched on here will be taken up and discussed more fully in the chapters that follow as we try to account for the particular forms assumed by working-class politics in Birmingham and Sheffie in the 1920s.

Chapter 2

WORK AND UNEMPLOYMENT

2.1 Introduction

Though Britain emerged victorious from the carnage of the First World War, in the years that followed she faced unparalleled problems of industrial adjustment and depression. Initially, victory had fuelled optimistic expectations that Britain would once again dominate world markets in her staple products and from early 1919 to mid-1920 there was a brief but substantial trade boom caused by increased wages, the release of a pent-up demand for consumer goods and the necessity of replacing worn-out machinery and augmenting the stock of housing.[1] But in 1921 Britain experienced one of the worst depressions in her history and thereafter, though there was a slow and unspectacular recovery up to 1929, the underlying reality was constant: the traditional leading sectors of the economy - coal, iron and steel and cotton - contracted under the pressure of falling demand; the newer growth industries prospered but could only partially compensate for job losses suffered elsewhere. Britain's staple trades were confronted by similar problems. Their export markets were lost due to increased foreign competition, import substitution and the erection of trade barriers, their machinery and plant were old and inefficient and their products expensive. Our overall competitiveness was weakened by the better wages and conditions enjoyed by British workers as compared to their foreign counterparts and was hampered further by the decision taken in 1925 to return to the Gold Standard at pre-war parity which overvalued the pound and British exports by about 10 per cent.[2]

---

1. D.H. Aldcroft, The Interwar Economy (1970), p. 31.
2. S. Glynn, J. Oxborrow, Interwar Britain: A Social and Economic History (1976), p. 100;
   C.L. Mowat, Britain Between the Wars, 1918-1940 (1968), p. 267.

From 1929 and through the early 1930s Britain suffered severely in the world economic crisis triggered by the Wall Street Crash in October, 1929. The structural problems remained but Britain was hit particularly by her dependence on export sales to the primary producers that were now the countries struck hardest by falling prices for their own commodities and reduced American demand.[1] The winter of 1932 to 1933 saw the trough of the depression but recovery, when it came, was weak and regionally disparate until the rearmament boom and the Second World War once more put human labour at a premium.

These economic difficulties meant that the 1920s and 1930s were uncomfortable years in which to be a member of the working classes. Some were lucky; those in regular, full-time employment enjoyed a rise in living standards for, though money wages were reduced, real incomes rose as a result of the fall in the cost of living.[2] But, of course, many did not have work; from 1920 to 1939, unemployment never fell below an average of 10 per cent and at times it rose far higher.

Naturally, these generalisations conceal a wide range of industrial and regional diversity. The experience of the iron and steel trade was very different from that of the prospering car trade, electrical engineering boomed whilst heavy engineering was in deep depression. The contrasts were also reflected geographically for the declining industries were concentrated in South Wales, the industrial North and central Scotland whereas those industries thatwere expanding were drawn to the relatively prosperous South-East and Midlands. The hunger marches from the dying communities of industrial Britain measured in shoe leather and blisters the growing gap between North and South and graphically illustrated the divergent experiences of the British people at this time.

---

1. Aldcroft, op. cit., pp. 38-40.
2. E.C. Ramsbottom, 'The Course of Wage Rates in the United Kingdom, 1921-1934', Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, 98, IV, (1935), p. 661

2.2 The Local Economy of Birmingham

(i) The New Industries

Of all the major industrial areas, Birmingham was the most fortunate between the wars. Though many of the town's traditional industries continued the decline that had been apparent even before the First World War, Birmingham was particularly well placed to adapt to the changed demands and circumstances of the interwar period. Their lack of dependence on heavy raw materials, the spread of electrical power and the flexibility of road transport meant that the new industries of the 1920s and 1930s were no longer attracted to the coalfields and ports as had been their predecessors in the 19th. century. Other criteria dictated their location, notably the desire for a conveniently central position to facilitate collection of raw materials and marketing, the availability of cheap and plentiful land and the existence of an unorganised and acquiescent workforce.[1]

On all these counts, Birmingham scored well. It was strategically placed geographically, possessed ample undeveloped land and boasted a workforce renowned for its tractability and poor unionisation. 'Labour unrest is practically unknown...Birmingham's labour is good, plentiful and cheap', claimed the Corporation in a publicity brochure issued in 1931.[2] Employers were also encouraged to set up in the area by the early surrender of a large part of the local workforce to mechanisation and semi-skilled labour and, conversely, by the pool of skilled workers provided by the town's declining traditional industries. The very multiplicity and diversit of Birmingham's trades meant that a wide range of skills and abilities were available to the new entrepreneurs whilst local industrialists, faced with falling markets in one sector, were better able than many of their counterparts elsewhere to invest in and adapt to the demands of new products.

---

1. A. Plummer, New British Industries in the Twentieth Century (1937), p. 34
2. City of Birmingham Information Bureau, Birmingham: the Hub of Industrial England (1931), no pagination.
3. G.C. Allen, The Industrial Development of Birmingham and the Black Country (1966), pp. 439-41.

The expansion of the car industry was the major success story in the British interwar economy. As prices and running costs fell and reliability increased, a widening public took up motoring while the problems of foreign competition that so afflicted other areas of British industry were largely obviated by the protective McKenna duties first imposed in 1915. After a difficult post-war adjustment, the motor trade boomed and in the five years up to 1929 U.K. car sales rose by 37 per cent. Austins, by the inauguration of its first cheap, mass-production car (the Austin Seven), capitalised particularly on this expansion and between 1923 and 1929 the workforce of its Longbridge works expanded from 2-3000 to 13,500.[1]

Whilst Austins was the largest single employer numerous other vehicle and cycle firms in Birmingham enjoyed a similar growth. Morris, Rover and Wolseley all had works in the city, and a number of firms continued to concentrate on the manufacture of cycles and motor cycles - itself enjoying a considerable boom in the later 1920s. By 1928, it was estimated that there were some 200 firms in Birmingham engaged in the manufacture of cars and cycles, employing a workforce of around 80,000.[2]

One significant disadvantage of the car and cycle industry was that it was heavily seasonal. When demand was at its slackest in midwinter and the early summer, a large proportion of the workforce was summarily laid off. On the other hand, the trade employed large numbers in the manufacture of components in addition to those engaged in the assembling of the finished product. In all, it was calculated that the car and cycle trade gave work to some 110,000 people locally by 1927.[3]

Meanwhile, an analagous and complementary process was taking place with the development of the electrical engineering industry. In Birmingham, the trade rose from employing some 6000 workers in 1911 to over 20,000 by

---

1. R.A. Church, Herbert Austin. The British Motor Car Industry to 1941 (1979), p. 69, p. 84, p. 149.
2. Birmingham Corporation, Birmingham Commercially Considered (Birmingham, 1928), p. 25.
3. G.C. Allen, op. cit., p. 409.

1927.[1] The two major local employers, Lucas and GEC, each had 7000 workers on the pay-roll by 1924.[2]

(ii) The Traditional Industries

The other side to this picture was the serious decline suffered by Birmingham's traditional industries. Changes in fashion and technology left these old-established trades struggling to survive. The evolution of the jewellery and brassware trades may be taken as representative.

As we noted earlier, jewellery manufacture employed approximately 50,000 workers before the First World War. This figure fell to about 20,000 during the War itself as production went over to munitions work but rose again as the trade enjoyed a brief boom in the post-war years. This was to be very much the swansong of the jewellery trade, however - from 1921, a severe and chronic depression set in and the industry was never again to enjoy anything approaching its pre-war glory. By the late 1920s, around 30,000 were employed in jewellery manufacture; by 1937, the workforce had fallen to just over 16,000.[3]

There were a number of reasons for this transformation. Initially, as boom turned to slump, jewellery was one of the first trades to feel the pinch as a result of its luxury status. Thenceforth, changes in taste in the 1920s, when prevailing trends were to emphasise the unadorned and boyish in women's fashions, and the transfer of luxury spending to other items were to compound the process. It is a good example of Birmingham's economic resilience that a considerable part of this spending was to go on motor cars and the new consumer goods - products that employed increasing

---

1. G.C. Allen, op. cit., p. 339.
2. H. Nockolds, Lucas: the First Hundred Years (1976), p. 194; B.M., 16;10;1925
3. J.C. Roche, 'The History, Development and Organisation of the Birmingham Jewellery and Allied Trades', M. Comm. thesis, University of Birmingham 1927, pp.57-59, p. 90;
   Memorandum of Evidence Submitted by the Corporation of Birmingham to the Royal Commission on the Geographical Distribution of the Industrial Population (Birmingham, 1937), p. 6.

numbers in the area as the decade progressed and a large number of former jewellery workers.[1]

In 1914, the brass trade could claim to be the most important local industry after jewellery but in the interwar period it too suffered considerable upheaval.[2] In fact, the brass trade encapsulated the split personality of Birmingham's economy for while one sector prospered and expanded through standardisation, mass production and adaptation to new demands, the other, wedded to the manufacture of specialised products by traditional methods, was in the depths of depression. Demand for the type of product concentrated upon before the War fell as electricity superseded gas, as aluminium and stainless steel were increasingly widely adopted for domestic purposes, and as public taste moved away from the heavily ornate to the cleaner and simpler lines of the post-war years.[3] Those areas of the brass trade that had previously been the basis of the industry's prosperity became stagnant and depressed and four Trades Boards were established in the immediate post-war period to oversee wages and conditions in these declining sectors that were predominantly based in Birmingham. It was estimated that there were 450 local firms that came under the jurisdicti of the Stamped and Pressed Metalwares Board alone.[4]

On the other hand, while the finished brass section declined, the primary sector was thriving - a clear illustration of the extent to which the trade was becoming subsidiary to the area's engineering industry and turning over to the production of electrical and motor accessories.[5] The number employed in the brass trade remained a fairly constant 30- to 40,000 but the stability of the figure conceals the important transformation occurring in the industry.

---

1. Roche, op. cit., pp. 58-59, pp. 91-92.
2. R.S. Smirke (for the Board of Trade), Report on the Birmingham Trades: The Brass Trade (1914), p. 4.
3. Memorandum of Evidence Submitted by the Corporation of Birmingham... (Birmingham, 1937), p. 7.
4. Minutes of Evidence taken before the Committee of Inquiry into the Working and Effects of the Trade Boards Acts (1922), p. 652.
5. G.C. Allen, op. cit., p. 412.

(iii) The Local Economy of Birmingham, 1918-1931

Whilst we have covered the leading sectors of the local economy, there remains a multiplicity of trades about which individually it is impossible to give details. However, the processes at work in the brass trade could be seen effecting similar changes in many of Birmingham's old-established industries and for our purposes it is necessary to emphasise only several characteristics of the local economy which, it will be argued, had a strong influence on the nature of local politics.

One of these is simply that diversity and variety of industry already commented upon. It was calculated that there were over 8000 different occupations in Birmingham and 1000 trades; the Birmingham Mail claimed that there was 'probably no town in the world that has so great a diversity of industries'.[1] This circumstance alone had its own impact on the shape of local politics and industrial relations.

It is thus difficult to generalise about any 'typical' size of productive unit. The reality was one of utmost diversity in the type of works and factory - not just between the different trades but also within them. There were two broad trends in the local economy, though: one, modernising and dynamic, towards mechanised, larger-scale production; the other, stagnant and depressive, found in the traditional industries based on small-scale, craft production. Clearly, the economically strategic and numerically more important trend was the growth of the new industries and their suppliers. For the most part, Birmingham, which in the 19th. century had been able to expand its industry through the multiplication of small units, was no longer to resist the many inducements to large-scale production.

On the other hand, the figures given in Table 2.2 (which exclude those working in shops employing less than ten workers) give an indication of the number of tiny firms still involved in several typical Birmingham

---

1. B.M., 5;5;1924.

Table 2.2 Employment in Birmingham's Traditional Industries

	Companies making returns		Employees in W. Midlands	Average no. of employees per W.Mids fi
	Gt. Britain	W. Midlands		
Needle, pin, fishhook and small metalwares	80	59	7960	135
Tools and implements	240	61	5808	95
Finished brass trade	417	213	21060	91
Small arms (private companies)	27	20	1007	50
Plate and jewellery	438	258	13889	32

Note: The area here designated as the West Midlands covers Birmingham and the Black Country.
Source: Final Report of the Fourth Census of Production (1930); Part II. The Iron and Steel Trades... (1934).

---

trades. As can be seen, two major employers of Birmingham labour, jewellery and brass, were still primarily organised in small units of production. Thoug these were trades whose importance was diminishing, the type of work organisation and process they represented remained a significant part of the Birmingham worker's industrial experience.

There are no overall statistics available concerning the numbers employed in the different sizes of productive unit locally but at a rough estimate perhaps one in five of the Birmingham workforce was employed in a factory with over 2000 workers by the later 1920s.[1] Thereafter, there was a graded continuum of every kind of work environment; many now worked in mechanised factories employing several hundred hands but a still significant proportion worked in the small works for which Birmingham was famous.

Finally, one characteristic that the new and older-established industries shared was a prevalence of female employment. In the local economy as a whole, over one third of the total workforce was female and, unusually in Birmingham, women were strongly entrenched in manufacturing

---

1. My estimate, calculated from the evidence of brochures, newspapers, etc. on the numbers employed by Birmingham firms

industry.[1]

There were a number of reasons why women workers were exceptionally prominent in the Birmingham economy. The most important was that the chief industries of the town were concerned with the working of light metal. In the brass, small metalwares and jewellery industries, manual dexterity and attention to detail were demanded rather than physical strength and they were deemed especially suitable employers of female labour. Having established a foothold, women were able to extend their position through the particular evolution of local industry where male craft privileges disappeared earlier than elsewhere. Women were adjudged physically and temperamentally better suited to the repetitive processes of the new productive methods and, of course, they also accepted lower wages.[2] The seasonality of many Birmingham industries and the relatively low wage rates of much of the male workforce meant that the women's contribution to the family income was particularly prized. There was thus a social acceptance of female labour in Birmingham that was found in few other areas.

The 1931 Census showed that 22.8 per cent of the metal-working labour force, 25.5 per cent of those engaged in manufacturing electrical apparatus and 35.5 per cent of jewellery workers were female.[3] Even in the car industry the proportion of women workers stood at 19 per cent compared to the national average of 7 per cent.[4] But in whatever trade they happened to work, women were almost invariably concentrated in the least skilled and worst paid sections. Birmingham was no exception to this generalisation though women formed a particularly large section of its workforce.

---

1. The 1921 and 1931 Censuses both suggest that 34.2 per cent of the Birmingham workforce was female.
2. M.L. Yates, Wages and Labour Conditions in British Engineering (1937), p. 159.
3. Census of England and Wales, 1931. Warwickshire, Table 16.
4. Church, op. cit., p. 152. These figures apply to 1924.

2.3 Trades Unionism in Birmingham

Birmingham was a trade union organiser's nightmare. Conditions in both the old and the new industries militated against the strong unionisation of the local workforce. It was clearly a cri de coeur when Walter Lewis (local organiser of the Electrical Trades Union) claimed that Birmingham was 'absolutely stinking' with non-unionists.[1] In this section, we attempt to document and account for this backwardness; firstly, looking at the special factors in the old and new industries and the more general circumstances that inhibited trade union organisation, and latterly, by contrast, examining those areas in which trades unionism was strong.

(i) The Traditional Industries

In the jewellery trade, trades unionism was a negligible force. In 1922, the National Union of Gold, Silver and Allied Trades (NUGSAT) had a local membership of 2400 when the number of jewellery workers in Birmingham might conservatively be estimated at ten times that figure.[2] Indeed, a rival organisation set up by the employers, the Birmingham Jewellery, Silver, Electro-Plate and Allied Trades Union, had been rather more successful, having at its peak in 1920 a membership of 3063.[3] Even though the latter union was wound up in 1922, the membership of NUGSAT was to fall both absolutely and proportionately in the depression of the 1920s.

Clearly, the jewellery workers' case is a classic example of the problems of trade union organisation in a small-scale handicraft industry. The trade was minutely subdivided both by productive unit and work process and there was little opportunity for the development of any unified industrial consciousness. The prime importance of manual skills meant that the wage contract was frequently a private bargain struck between

---

1. T.C., 17;7;1925.
2. E.C. Shepherd, 'Unemployment in Birmingham (September, 1922)', in J.J. Astor (ed.), The Third Winter of Unemployment (1923), p. 96.
3. Report of the Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies; Part C, Trade Unions, 1920.

the employer and individual worker. Masters often worked alongside their employees and had, in any case, frequently 'risen from the ranks' themselves. The opportunities for a skilled workman to set up for himself in jewellery were good for it was a labour intensive trade requiring little investment in capital equipment.[1]

In brass, the picture was more complicated, mainly due to the greater variety of the trade itself. Under the advantageous conditions obtaining during the War and post-war boom, the National Society of Brass and Metal Mechanics (NSBMM) was able to increase significantly its membership and influence. In 1920, the union had some 22,836 members in Birmingham, at which point probably two thirds of the local brass workers were organised.[2] But in the slump of the early 1920s, membership fell rapidly, reaching just 11,500 by 1922.[3] Thenceforth, little more than a third of the local workforce was organised.

Of those that were in the union, most were concentrated in the larger units of the trade. Henry Dawson, an organiser of the NSBMM, defended the necessity of Trades Board supervision, stating that the Society found it impossible to influence matters except in the 'large companies' employing 200 workers or so.[4] If the size of manufacturing unit was one problem for the NSBMM, another was the practice of subcontracting This had been declining since the 1880s but even in the 1920s it was not unusual for a foreman or charge-hand to be responsible for hiring, work organisation and piecework rates - a method that divided the working class and distanced the employer from the expression of their grievances.[5]

The degree of organisation in an allied trade - bedstead manufacture - was similar. Membership of the Bedstead Workmen's Association rose from

---

1. Roche, op. cit., p. 60.
2. T.H. Kelly, 'Wages and Labour Organisation in the Brass Trade of Birmingham and District', Ph. D. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1930, p. 658.
3. Shepherd, op. cit., p. 96.
4. Minutes of Evidence taken before the Committee of Inquiry into the Working and Effects of the Trade Boards Act (1922), pp. 652-53.
5. Kelly, op. cit., p. 53.

706 in January, 1919 to 1263 in 1922 (largely as a result of enrolling women members for the first time) before declining once more to just over 800 by 1931.[1] Keeping pace with the decline of the trade's fortunes in the twenties, these figures meant that around 33 per cent of the eligible workforce belonged to the Association.

What was true in the case of the jewellery and brass trades was also true, mutatis mutandis, of many of the other traditional industries of Birmingham. The only exceptions seem to have occurred where unions enjoyed the active support or cooperation of the employing companies. Thus, in 1920 the Penworkers' Federation organised 4250 of a possible 4758 workers and, though membership fell sharply in the following decade, it continued to represent a high proportion of the trade's employees.[2] Another example was the Screw, Nut, Bolt and Rivet Trade Society, established by the management of GKN and recruiting only among the company's employees, which retained a steady membership of around 1700 throughout the 1920s.[3]

(ii) The New Industries

In 1929, not more than one in twenty of the workers of Austins belonged to a trade union.[4] At Dunlops, only the craft unions maintained any semblance of organisation as the management successfully excluded orthodox trades unionism with their inauguration of a comprehensive system of works councils invested with full powers of negotiation.[5] The proportions of trade union membership in most of the other major works of

---

1. Report of the Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies; Part C, Trade Unions, 1919-1931
2. Penworkers' Federation records; MSS42/3/1/45. Membership figures, 19;5;1920.
3. Report of the Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies; Part C, Trade Unions, 1919-1931.
4. B.G., 2;4;1929.
5. Dunlop Gazette, 20;12;1927; BTC minutes, 23;10;1929.

Birmingham were little, if any, better.

One major obstacle in the way of effective organisation of the local workforce was the early erosion of craft privilege and the prevalence of semi-skilled employment. In the surge of trades unionism before, during and briefly after the War, a large number of semi-skilled workers had been organised, notably by the Workers' Union. From 1918 to 1920, the pages of the Workers' Union Record were buoyant with self-confidence and success but by the end of 1921 they record only a succession of wage cuts and worsening conditions. In the winter of 1921-1922, the Small Heath District Workers' Union Recreation Society had to report that it had dispensed with the usual turkey and trimmings for its annual Christmas dinner; cold ham and beef, cheese and mince pies were being provided instead so that 'it might be brought within the reach of the members to be present'.[1] The post-war depression broke the back of the Workers' Union and it proved quite unable to regain its former position even in the recovery that followed. Membership in the West Midlands fell from 50,000 in 1920 to 4000 in 1929.[2]

The corollary to the significance of semi-skilled employment was the comparative weakness of the craft unions, notably the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU). At the end of 1920, there were 8745 AEU members in Birmingham; by 1928, the number had declined to 5371.[3] Given the importance of Birmingham as an engineering centre and its size, these figures are indicative of the Union's feeble local presence. Such organisation as the AEU did possess was crippled by the trades depression of the early 1920s when a large number of members were made redundant and many companies took the opportunity to rid themselves of trade union activists.[4] The 1922

---

1. Workers' Union Record, February, 1922.
2. R. Hyman, The Workers' Union (Oxford, 1971), p. 149.
3. AEU Monthly Journal, December, 1920;
   R.P. Hastings, 'The Labour Movement in Birmingham, 1927-1945', M.A. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1959, p. 95.
4. AEU Monthly Journal, November, 1921.

lock-out both demonstrated and hastened the AEU's decline. The lock-out of AEU members did not seriously affect local industry - no single factory was closed completely and unemployment was even seen to go down slightly. The involvement of the other 47 unions with members in engineering had a little more impact but even then it could not be claimed that the lock-out was a success from a trade union point of view; 'members of all unions either refused to come out or returned to work in twos or threes'.[1] The National Union of General and Municipal Workers (NUGMW) recorded that even before the lock-out 'many men, including our own members, went out of their way to inform their foremen that they did not now belong to a union'.[2] Of 60,000 workers in Federated firms in Birmingham and the Black Country, not more than 20,000 actually stopped work; the employers put the figure at only 16,000.[3] There was no substantial advance in organisation in the years that followed. In 1927, Robert Dempster, local organiser of the AEU, admitted that there was not a single Federated firm with a functioning shop committee.[4]

To summarise, a number of factors militated against trade union organisation in the new industries. The high proportion of non-skilled work created a workforce that lacked traditions of craft and union that might otherwise have provided the basis of ideology and organisation with which to contest the employers' power. Even before the War the lack of apprenticeship amongst the young workers readily recruited to the semi-skilled trades had prevented the passing on and inheritance of a trade union tradition.[5] Post-war circumstances merely consolidated this absence.

---

1. Workers' Union Record, June, 1922.
2. NUGMW (Birmingham and Western District), minutes and reports of District Council meetings. Quarterly Report, March, 25, 1922.
3. B.P., 12;5;1922, 18;5;1922.
4. LAB 10/5, PRO, Trade Union reactions to proposed Trade Union legislation Report of Chief Conciliation Officer, Birmingham, 13;1;1927.
5. C. More, Skill and the English Working Class, 1870-1914 (1980), p. 112.

And the newness of the workforces to their industries, and sometimes to the area, restricted the likelihood of any alternative tradition being formed. In any case, trade conditions were unpropitious for any trade union fight-back. Many workers were grateful to have work at all in a generally depressed economy and they knew well that there was a large pool of labour willing to take their place should they lose the favour of their employer - and most employers at this time made no secret of their opposition to trades unionism. All the major firms of the new industries opposed trade union interference in the operation of their factories, sometimes with the 'carrot' of factory councils and generous welfare schemes and sporting facilities, often with the 'stick' of redundancy for known activists. Of course, the fact that most of these firms also paid relatively high wages (higher than those in the older industries from which most of their workers originated) was not without influence in creating a manageable workforce.[1]

The more general conditions which hampered attempts at organisation are well observed by John Parker. Referring to the paradox that labour organisation was weakest where demand for labour was greatest, he argued that this was due:[2]

> to the absence of homogeneity among the inhabitants, many of whom are immigrants to the new areas, to the diversity of types and conditions of work, and, in some cases, to the small size of the employing firm. These obstacles in the way of the organiser are aggravated in all large towns...by the fact that the homes of the workers are frequently scattered over areas far removed from their place of employment. There is thus little opportunity for a sense of solidarity among fellow workers to rest upon a basis of neighbourly contacts or even of family life.

(iii) General Conditions

There were other factors too that operated in both the old and the

---

1. J. Parker, 'Trade Union Difficulties in New Areas' in G.D.H. Cole (ed.) British Trade Unionism Today (1945),
   R.C. Whiting, The View from Cowley: the Impact of Industrialisation upon Oxford, 1918-1939 (Oxford, 1983), pp. 44-45.
2. Parker, op. cit., pp. 241-42.

new industries. One was the seasonality of many of the major trades. In the first place, this was a factor which interrupted the shared experience of work and reduced the continuity of organisational effort. In the second, it was undoubtedly a phenomenon that local employers used to rid themselves of active trades unionists. A good example of this occurred in the aftermath of the famous strike at Austins in March-April, 1929. Very few of the 10,000 strikers were trade union members but trade union officials came in to negotiate a settlement and for a short period there was a comprehensive shop stewards' network and Austins was thoroughly unionised.[1] But the Company soon reaped its revenge. By December, it was reported that, as seasonal variations exacerbated by the international slump took their effect, the number employed at Longbridge stood at just 3000.[2] In the early summer of 1930 when the usual dismissals took place, many of those affected were shop stewards.[3] As Dick Etheridge, a shop stewards' leader in the very different environment after the Second World War, recalled:[4]

> The break-up of the shop stewards plus the seasonal form of employment meant that no-one could get established. Unemployment was used deliberately to undermine union organisation and it used to be said that Austins couldn't be organised.

Another serious obstacle in the way of effective organisation was the large number of women employed in many of the staple local trades. Women, for a whole variety of interlinking and complementary reasons, were far harder to unionise than men. As Barbara Drake observed:[5]

> The semi-skilled or unskilled character of women's trades, and absence of trade monopoly; the "meantime" character of female labour, leading a woman to attach less importance than a man to trade conditions; the consequent less effective trade union organisation, aggravated by the lack of political power; the tradition of the "pocket money worker" or "other means of subsistence"; the low standard of living accepted by a woman and the small value set by

---

1. Church, op. cit., pp. 151-52.
2. National Minority Movement, Midland Bureau minutes, 12;12;1929.
3. AEU Monthly Journal, July, August, 1930.
4. Quoted in R.A. Leeson, Strike. A Live History, 1887-1971 1973 , p. 154
5. B. Drake, Women in the Engineering Trades 1918), pp. 11-12.

> herself on her own labour...one factor reacts upon another, and female labour stands a ready prey to exploitation by the employer.

All these factors applied, perhaps with particular force, in the case of Birmingham. 'Birmingham was again becoming a "black hole" of sweated women', lamented the women's organiser of the NUGMW in 1926.[1] In 1922, it was estimated that not more than five per cent of the women in the small metalwares sector belonged to unions; in 1930, the proportion was said to have fallen to between one and two per cent.[2] Nor was the overall picture any brighter - in the mid-twenties, it was reckoned that of 120,000 female workers in Birmingham just 3000 were unionised.[3]

The attitude of the male-dominated trades unions was not calculated to improve this situation; most were apathetic, if not actually hostile, to the organisation of women though, when it had become clear that all attempts to exclude women from the labour market had failed, a few belatedly adopted a more constructive policy. The NSBMM refused to affiliate women for nearly 50 years though it eventually changed its attitude for patriotic reasons during the First World War.[4] The Bedstead Workmen's Association was equally tardy. Though women formed between one third and one half of the workforce, the Association did not agree to recruit women until 1919 and did not change its name to the Bedstead Workers' Association until 1924.[5] Only the Penworkers' Federation was an exception to this bleak picture for 84 per cent of its membership (and 84 per cent of the eligible workforce) were female but here, clearly, somewhat unusual circumstances applied.[6]

---

1. T.C., 12;3;1926.
2. Minutes of Evidence taken before the Committee of Inquiry into the Working and Effects of the Trade Boards Act (1922), pp. 655-56; Kelly, op. cit., p. 236.
3. BTC, Annual Report, 1925-26, p. 7.
4. B. Drake, Women in Trade Unions (1920), p. 115.
5. BWA EC minutes, 31;11;1919, 27;5;1924.
6. Penworkers' Federation records; MSS42/3/1/45. Membership figures, 19;5;1920.

Finally, we may amplify the comments made by John Parker on the difficulties of trade union organisation in large towns with a diversity of trades and work conditions. The overall heterogeneity of the Birmingham economy and, in particular, the chasm dividing the experience of those in the growth industries and those in the traditional trades, did much to impede the development of any unifying industrial consciousness. There was too great a range of separate, sometimes competing, trades interests for general or shared grievances to manifest themselves except on very rare occasions. The reality was of a highly fragmented working class, divided by industry and work experience, divided residentially and divided by sex.

(iv) Areas of Trade Union Strength

Those few sections of the Birmingham economy that were strongly unionised may be separated into two broad categories: either they comprised skilled workers, or they were located in what were termed contemporarily the 'sheltered trades', which is to say that market forces were not the prime determinant of employment levels and work conditions.

We have referred already to the pockets of unionised skilled workers found in the large works of the new industries. Even in Dunlops, the Heating and Domestic Engineers, the Building Trades Workers and the Patternmakers all reported 100 per cent membership in 1929.[1] The General Strike was a good indicator of union strength. It appears that few factories were completely closed down but considerable disruption was caused by the withdrawal of such trades unionists as there were, who were often to be found occupying key points of the production process. At Lucas, 495 engineers and others withdrew their labour.[2] At Austins, a few wood machinists, toolmakers and coremakers struck work in a rather risky and lonely protest.[3] Only the engineers struck at Dunlops. The only major works to have closed down completely was the Metropolitan Carriage and

2. Nockolds, op. cit., p. 208.
3. Church, op. cit., pp. 149-50; B.P., 19;5;1976.
1. BTC minutes, 23;10;1929.

Wagon Company (manufacturers of railway rolling stock) in Saltley.[1] The railway rolling stock factories were also the only important works to have been completely shut by the 1922 engineering lock-out.[2] Clearly, in these works, which were unusual in Birmingham as centres of large-scale, heavy industry, a large proportion of the men belonged to the AEU and other engineering unions.

Turning to the so-called sheltered trades, here circumstances were far more conducive to good labour organisation. The Council, for example, had an electoral interest and clearly defined constitutional duty to safeguard the wages and conditions of its employees. And though the rates did not provide a bottomless purse, they did represent a more secure source of income than did sales on the open market. Thus the NUGMW could claim 95 per cent membership in the Gas, Water, Electricity, Tramshed and Permanent Way Departments of Birmingham Corporation and all the bus workers belonged to the Transport and General Workers Union.[3] An analogous situation occurred in the Post Office where the Union of Post Office Workers (UPOW) had a total membership in the district of 3317 out of a possible 3579.[4]

The railways, though still privately owned, were nonetheless the subject of considerable Government regulation. They were also comparatively free of competition and their workers were more secure than some in the labour force. At this time, a job on the railways was highly prized and the industry recruited a calibre of employee well able to organise. By the First World War, the railways were thoroughly organised and in the interwar period in Birmingham, as elsewhere, the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) and the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) organised virtually all the manual staff while the Railway Clerks' Association

---

1. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/118/3; Dallas to Steel-Maitland, 5;5;1926.
2. Workers' Union Record, June, 1922.
3. NUGMW (Birmingham and Western District), District Committee minutes; letter from T. Hurley, 10;11;1927, B.G., 3;5;1926.
4. The Fellowship (Organ of the Birmingham District Council of UPOW), June, 1922.

(RCA) represented a high proportion of those on the clerical side. The scale and solidity of the railwaymen's organisation was amply demonstrated by the two major disputes that affected the trade in our period. The 1919 railway stoppage was total in Birmingham.[1] In the General Strike, the railwaymen were probably the best organised and most nearly unanimous section of workers in Birmingham; no more than 20 railway workers were reported as having disobeyed the strike call.[2]

It is also worthwhile pointing out the geographical concentration of trades unionism that occurred in East Birmingham. The works of the Metropolitan Carriage Company and the Midland Carriage Company were both situated in Saltley. Several of the Corporation's gas works were located in Duddeston and Washwood Heath, whilst the majority of Birmingham's railway workers lived in Duddeston, Saltley and Washwood Heath. Here, at least, in Birmingham there was a strong trade union presence.

Finally, we should refer to conditions in the Bournville Works of Cadbury Brothers in Selly Oak. The Company was a major employer in its own right with a pay-roll of between 8000 and 9000 during most of the 1920s, but its influence spread further than mere numbers would suggest.[3] Cadburys prided themselves on being liberal and humane employers and the working conditions, educational and recreational facilities provided were undeniably excellent. The Company also encouraged trades union membership amongst its workforce but, as it also set great store by its system of Works Councils, this was a more ambiguous process.

In 1918, Bournville had been one of the strongest bases of the shop stewards' movement in Birmingham (a fact which speaks for its weakness in the local engineering industry). By February that year, 54 shop stewards had been elected led by H.J. Morcombe.[4] In the meantime, however, the Company went ahead with its own system of shop and works committees and,

---

1. B.P., 27;9;1919.
2. Birmingham Central Railway Strike Committee minutes, passim.
3. I.O. Williams, The Firm of Cadbury, 1831-1931 (1931), p. 117.
4. Bournville Works Magazine, February, 1918.

in November, when the first meeting of the official Men's Works Council took place, H.J. Morcombe was the secretary of the employees' side.[1] The stewards had supported the Company's scheme in the belief that it would enable the extension of workers' control. In fact, it killed off the shop stewards' movement as an autonomous force and largely superseded the necessity for trade union representation. The Company itself was honest enough to admit that the Councils had no executive or policy-making functions.

Cadburys had, then, by their actions not altogether unwittingly neutralised the independent organs of the Labour movement. In 1926, although most trades unionists obeyed the strike call, it was reported that by May, 8, they were 'stampeding and falling over themselves to return to work'.[3] In the aftermath of the General Strike, the unions lost considerable numbers of members. This was partly the result of genuine unhappiness amongst the workers at the strike call insofar as it affected their own company but reflected also a change of policy by the directors who withdrew the rule that members of the Works Councils had to belong to their relevant union.[4] In 1929, it was estimated that only one fifth of the Bournville workforce were members of trades unions.[5]

There might, in fact, seem to be a good case to be made for taking Cadburys as an example of trade union weakness but to take the figures at face value would be to ignore the vital importance of Cadburys as a company that, at least in principle, supported a virile trades unionism and that did in practice welcome into its employment trades union and working-class activists blacklisted elsewhere. In this sense, despite the decline of trades unionism in the factory in the late 1920s, Bournville remained an essential ideological and organisational base for the Birmingham Labour movement in an otherwise hostile climate.

---

1. Bournville Works Magazine, December, 1918.
2. Williams, op. cit., pp. 116-21.
3. BTC General Strike collection of bulletins, leaflets, etc.; King's Norton Joint Strike Committee to Central Emergency Committee, 8;5;1926.
4. Correspondence between Cadbury Bros. and Birmingham Trade Union organisations; G. Bannister (23;10;1926), W.H. Summers (1;11;1926), F. Packwood (9;11;1926).
5. New Leader (New York), 13;7;1929.

2.4 Workplace Influence on Political Attitudes in Birmingham

(i) Small-Scale Manufacture

A matter of perennial interest to social scientists and one that plays a major explanatory role in the historiography of Birmingham is the political influence of small-scale production. As we have seen, it is the peculiarly small-scale nature of Birmingham manufacture that is held to have been an important base of the political class collaboration and Conservatism of the local working class. Such conclusions are offered considerable backing by research evidence indicating that small units support a non-radical occupational and political culture among their workforces.[1] Our findings with regard to interwar Birmingham broadly corroborate these arguments though it will be argued that the situation was not static and that, by the 1920s, the political impact of the small-scale economy can no longer bear the explanatory weight sometimes placed on it.

The workgroup about which the strongest evidence exists is the jewellery workers who were principally concentrated in the St. Paul's ward. The evidence of voting patterns seems unambiguous; Labour won just two out of thirteen municipal election contests in St. Paul's between 1919 and 1931 and the West Birmingham constituency of which it formed part was won by the Unionists in every interwar election. The organisation of the Birmingham jewellery trade and the industry's weak trades unionism have already been described and these two related factors must bear considerable responsibility for the undoubted Conservatism of its workforce. The overwhelming predominance of small workshops and the complex subdivision of the trade prevented the development of a shared industrial consciousness while close working relations with the employers encouraged the workers in a

---

1. S.M. Lipset, Political Man (1966), pp. 251-52;
E. Nordlirger, The Working-Class Tories (1967), pp. 204-05;
M. Stacey, Tradition and Change (1960), pp. 46-47.

collaborationist industrial relations strategy which stressed the shared interests of masters and men. The Birmingham Jewellery, Silver, Electro-Plate and Allied Trades Union (the association founded by the master jewellers) was chided by the Trades Council for 'its child-like trust in the employers' but the work experience of the jewellery employees predisposed them to a sectionalised cooperation with their masters rather than a unionised, oppositional stance.[1]

There were other important economic and political circumstances that encouraged the industry's Conservatism. One was the status of the industry as a luxury trade. The oft-quoted refrain of the working-class Conservative that he voted thus because it was the upper classes who had the money and provided employment represented a simple economic reality for the jewellery workforce and must inevitably have increased their support for the traditional hierarchical class system which secured their livelihood.

Another was the industry's growing experience of foreign competition and the consequent support for Tariff Reform shared by employers and workers alike. In 1926, it was the Goldbeaters' Trade Association who proposed an anti-dumping resolution to the Birmingham Trades Council, and in 1930 West Birmingham returned the highest number of signatures in the Unionists' Empire Pledge campaign of any constituency in the country.[2]

The political phenomenon that united these factors into devoted adhesion to the Unionist cause was Joseph Chamberlain who, through his campaigning for Protection and his constant efforts to safeguard the jewellery trade's interests and popularise its products, earned his reputation as the industry's 'guardian angel'.[3] In this, as in many other things, his sons followed self-consciously in their father's footsteps. Both Austen and Neville took a close interest in the trade's affairs and sought, without much success, to aid its prosperity.

---

1. BTC, Annual Report, 1918, p. 7.
2. BTC minutes, 24;9;1926; BUA minutes, 5;6;1930.
3. Roche, op. cit., pp. 46-47.

Turning to the brassware trade, the evidence from the industry's trade unions is largely of conservatism rather than Conservatism. Both the NSBMM and the Bedstead Workmen's Association (BWA) took a right-wing and 'patriotic' line during the War and both seceded from the less jingoistic Trades Council. The Brassworkers' leader, W.J. Davis, nursed a particular dislike of the pacifist and socialist elements he held to be becoming dominant in the Labour Party, going so far as to publicly support the candidature of Neville Chamberlain against the anti-war ILPer, J.W. Kneeshaw in 1918.[1] The Brassworkers and the BWA were also prominent advocates of the Trades Union Labour Party proposed in 1918 as a means of circumventing the middle-class, socialist take-over of the Labour Party apparently signalled by the Party's adoption of its new constitution in that year.[2]

In 1920, however, a national ballot of the NSBMM voted by a five to one majority to re-affiliate to the Labour Party.[3] In the same year, the local branches resumed their membership of Birmingham Trades Council and henceforth were to be leading subscribers to both the Council and Borough Labour Party. In the following year, Davis resigned unwillingly from the presidency of the union he had founded exactly fifty years earlier.[4] Through the 1920s, the NSBMM was to be a stolid supporter of the Labour Party both nationally and locally but it retained its traditional emphasis on seeking the defence of its members' interests through conciliation rather than conflict. Davis' successor but one, A.E. Gibbard, was on the executive council of the National Alliance of Employers and Employed.[5] The Bedstead Workers, on the other hand, did not rejoin the Trades Council and maintained no political fund.[6]

---

1. National Labour Party, NEC minutes, 3;1;1919.
2. NSBMM Quarterly Journal, January, 1919; BWA minutes, 5;6;1918.
3. NSBMM Quarterly Journal, January, 1920.
4. For biographical details of Davis, see: J. Bellamy, J. Saville (eds), Dictionary of Labour Biography, Vol. VI (1982), pp. 92-96; W.A. Dalley, The Life Story of W.J. Davis, J.P. (Birmingham, 1914).
5. B.P., 31;3;1925.
6. BWA minutes, 22;10;1924.

Bearing in mind that, for most of our period, no more than a third of Birmingham's brassworkers belonged to trades unions, what do these facts tell us about the political attitudes of the trade as a whole? As neither union was strong enough to enforce a closed shop, union membership required a positive decision on the part of the recruit and would seem to represent an affirmation of a consciousness of separate working-class interests felt more strongly than by other workers in the trade. The unions also recruited disproportionately amongst male workers from the larger units. The tendency of many women to be weaker in the perception of their interests as workers due to their stronger domestic attachments was thus reinforced by their lack of unionisation. It seems likely, therefore, that the politics of most brassworkers would be to the right of those who were trades unionists. As the latter tended to be conservative, it is probable that non-unionists - without workplace or union influences tending to increase Labour affiliations - were, to a significant degree, Conservative. The predominantly Unionist voting of the central wards, where most brassworkers lived, would appear to offer some support to this thesis.

The other traditional Birmingham trade of which we have firm evidence is penmaking. The Penworkers' Federation organised a large majority of the trade's workers though it was not a trade union in the conventional sense, having been established in 1919, during the first flush of enthusiasm for Whitleyism, with the full support of the local employers.[1] Its object was to foster harmonious industrial relations by facilitating mutual understanding and negotiated agreement between the two sides of industry. But the Federation indignantly repudiated suggestions that it was a 'yellow union' and the evidence does indicate that it may be interpreted as a genuine expression of its members' attitudes and not merely as an instrument of the employers' industrial strategy.[2]

---

1. Penworkers' Federation records, MSS42/3/1/14-16; miscellaneous correspondence, 1919.
2. Penworkers' Federation minutes, 4;11;1920.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the union's predominantly female membership valued above all else harmonious relations with their employers. When the Federation's president urged affiliation to the TUC, 'he spoke with diffidence on the matter, knowing the conservative attitudes of the members' but stressed that 'linking up with the Labour side of industry would not affect the existing good relations with the Association of British Steel Pen Makers'.[1] But even this mild symbol of Labour allegiances was too much for the delegates who first deferred the matter and then voted against it.[2] Neither would the Federation affiliate to the Trades Council.[3]

The Penworkers, then, possessed no apparent sense of independent or antagonistic working-class interests. Their belief in the two sides of industry expressed no feeling of conflict but validated a hierarchical division of labour in which the rule of the employing classes was accepted so long as they honoured their obligations to the workers. It is noteworthy that - with the important exception of the General Strike - the only intervention made by the Federation in national affairs was to express sympathy with the Royal Family during the King's illness in 1928.[4]

The conventional wisdom regarding the conservative influence of small-scale manufacture has, to a large extent, been borne out. The workers of Birmingham's long-established staple industries accepted, for the most part, the traditional ordering of society. This acceptance was fostered by the localised and personalised industrial relations of their trades and was consolidated at the political level by the unique role of Joseph Chamberlain and Birmingham Unionism in claiming to defend working-class interests whilst reinforcing and speaking for a strong sense of local identity which embraced all classes.

---

1. Penworkers' Federation minutes, 13;3;1923.
2. ibid., 4;12;1924.
3. ibid., 5;12;1929:
4. ibid., 6;12;1928.

(ii) Large-Scale Manufacture

All the presuppositions regarding small-scale industry are reversed in the analysis of the political impact of large-scale manufacture. Here, the impossibility of personalised management-employee relations, the higher degree of intra-class contact and the relative ease of unionisation are held to be responsible for the predominantly radical sympathies of the workforces.[1]

Certainly, these arguments would seem to apply in East Birmingham - an area of large-scale manufacture and entrenched trades unionism and the area of Birmingham firmest in its loyalties to Labour. The Unionist Chief Agent was forced to conclude of Saltley in 1930 that it was 'one of those wards where we cannot expect to turn over the solid trade union vote'.[2] In contrast to the firms of the traditional industries, here the employing companies were national in composition. The two rolling stock companies, for example, were part of the Vickers and Cammell Laird conglomerates, and BSA was a major combine in its own right. In the same way, the unions to which the men belonged (and the area had a predominantly male workforce) were national unions, often with leaders prominent in trade union and Labour politics. The parochialism that could flourish under the peculiar conditions obtaining in the traditional industries was not tenable here where the role of national capital and the impact of national disputes were a reminder to the workforces of their participation in a national economy as part of a wider working class.

It is an irony that the one major works to practise successfully a paternalistic industrial relations strategy - Cadburys - was a major influence promoting Labour sympathies amongst its workers. The Cadburys had been strong Liberals but in 1920 Cllr. George Cadbury Jr. joined the Labour Party in protest at the Liberals' opposition to any measures of

---

1. J. Goldthorpe et al., The Affluent Worker: Political Attitudes and and Behaviour (1968), pp. 51-64;
   Nordlinger, op. cit., p. 208.
2. BUA minutes, 14;11;1930.

nationalisation and their reactionary foreign policy.[1] Henceforth, he was to represent Labour on the City Council until his retirement from municipal politics in 1927. The Selly Oak ward, which partly contained the Bournville Works, was the other major Labour stronghold in Birmingham and the Unionists had no hesitation in blaming the personal influence of George Cadbury Jr. for this state of affairs.[2] In fact, this was a little simplistic as the Works itself was a principal base of Labour support. Six Labour councillors and a further six candidates were employees of the Company while the workforc as a whole appears to have been strongly Labour in its sympathies. Clearly, the example and emulation of a humane employer was one element in this but another probable factor was that Cadburys employed working-class activists, debarred from work elsewhere, who were to be a radicalising influence on their fellow-workers. More indirect but probably equally important was the fact that the Company was able to employ a high calibre workforce steeped in the ethos of working-class respectability. It was peculiarly this milieu that provided much of Labour's early support.

Cadburys was, of course, unique and elsewhere it is the weak labour organisation and hostility to trades unionism that require note. The factor militating against the unionisation of the new industries have already been noted. Whether the same causes operated against the formation of Labour sympathies is a moot point but the lack of experience of trades unionism itself was surely one factor reducing wider working-class affiliations. Such evidence as we have, though, suggests that a significant proportion of the large works' employees had developed Labour sympathies by the late 1920s.

In Erdington, Witton, where many GEC workers were resident, was known as a stronghold of Labour support in the area as the area's M.P., Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland, noted in somewhat jaundiced fashion when he drew the attention of a GEC director to the 'noisy socialists from the works who at present are trying - successfully - to intimidate people in Witton'.[3]

---

1. T.C., 23;1;1920.
2. BUA minutes, 16;7;1926.
3. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/117/3; Steel-Maitland to Dr. Railing, 19;2;1926.

Dunlops, at the other end of the constituency, also seems to have contained many Labour voters. The Pype Hayes estate, in which around 40 per cent of the houses were occupied by the firm's employees, was reported as overwhelmingly Labour.[1]

Beyond this, we are reduced to surmise. The influences of communal solidarity and trades unionism that made for Labour support in the older-established large-scale industries were absent. The workforces of the new works were newly recruited, geographically mobile and non-unionised. On the other hand, the circumstances that encouraged Unionist affiliations in the smaller-scale industries were absent. Management-employee relations were purely pecuniary in nature and instant dismissal when seasonal demand fell did not conduce to strong allegiances to the employing company. Strikes, such as those at Austins (1919, 1924 and 1929) and Dunlops (1919 and 1925), suggest that non-unionism should not be equated with industrial harmony. Nor could there be any traditionalistic sense of localism in industries where the capital was national and the workers came from disparate occupational and regional backgrounds. On balance, we may conclude that the workers of the new industries had fewer attachments to Unionism than many in Birmingham but lacked, as yet, any powerful inducements towards Labour voting. In the 1920s they represented a reservoir of potential Labour support which the parliamentary election results of 1929 suggest had been at least partly won over. 1931 crippled Labour's credibility amongst this key group of workers and it was not until the rearmament boom and the Second World War unionised and radicalised the workers of the new industries that they became a major base of Labour support in Birmingham.[2]

---

1. Dunlop Gazette, 29;9;1927;
   Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/118/3; Wiggins-Davies to Steel-Maitland, 4;11;1927.
2. R. Croucher, Engineers at War (1982), pp. 352-55.

(ii) Non-Industrial Sectors

To conclude this chapter, we will look at another group of occupations with little in common except the experience of governmental intervention which was to encourage in them a highly politicised awareness of their industrial interests. The fact that the same circumstance promoted strong unionisation made them particularly important in the Labour movement.

The railway workers were amongst the earliest trades unionist supporters of independent Labour politics. The authoritarian management style of the railway companies, the background of state regulation and the demand for greater state protection politicised the railway workers and led them to an early and sustained commitment to the Labour Party both at the national and local level.[1] By the 1920s, the transport policies of the Labour Party and the interests of the railway workers had become closely entwined; to the railwaymen, socialism was not merely an idealised vision of the future but a practical solution to their industrial problems and the Labour Party had become the natural vehicle of their industrial and political consciousness.

In Birmingham, it was reported in 1930 that 75 per cent of the members of the NUR had contracted in to pay the political levy to the Labour Party; in King's Norton, the proportion had risen to 100 per cent.[2] The practical individual commitment of many railway workers to the Labour Party was also shown by the fact that, between 1918 and 1931, 15 Labour councillors and candidates worked on the railways - they thus formed one in eleven of Labour's representatives and just over one in a hundred of the local workforce. The NUR was also the largest single contributor to Trades Council funds.

The Post Office workers were another group for whom the experience of government intervention served to inculcate a belief in the positive

---

1. D. Howell, British Workers and the Independent Labour Party, 1888-1906 (Manchester, 1983), ch. 4.
2. BBLP minutes, 17;12;1930;
   King's Norton Labour News, March, 1928.

role of the state and commitment to the Labour Party as the main proponent of this view. The Fellowship, the organ of the Birmingham district of UPOW, constantly urged the Labour case in its pages, and in 1924 the Union established a Municipal Elections Committee to fund UPOW candidates run under Labour auspices.[1] In 1926-1927, the last full year before the Government's ban on the political affiliation of civil service unions, UPOW affiliated what must have been its entire local membership of 3312 to the Trades Council.[2]

The importance of both these groups was recognised by the Unionists. P.J. Hannon, the M.P. for Moseley, argued that:[3]

> Although one cannot be confident of any useful results, I think it is desirable to get in touch with the railway and postmen through their organisations, and show them we are anxious to understand their point of view...and thus prevent these important classes from being completely absorbed by the Socialists.

There is no evidence that the Unionists enjoyed any success in efforts to lessen the disfavour in which they found themselves.

The concern of the Corporation workers for politics was always basic and direct. The Council was their employer and it was clearly in their interests to return either their own men or reliable Labour representatives to the Council to watch over their wages and conditions. Indeed, before the War the prime function of the Labour Party in municipal government in Birmingham, as elsewhere, seems to have been to represent the Corporation workers. The impact of municipal workers grew proportionately less as Labour politics spread and strengthened between the wars but even in the 1920s five Labour councillors were union representatives of the local gas and tramway workers, either through the NUGMW or the TGWU.

Finally, a brief reference is worthwhile to the case of the school teachers for, though they were not members of the manual working class, many were first generation products of scholarships and social mobility and they were a group which wielded considerable social influence in the

---

1. The Fellowship, February, 1924.
2. BTC, Annual Report, 1926-1927, p. 39.
3. BUA minutes, 12;12;1924.

community. The post-war Government's reactionary educational policies, particularly as manifested by the 1922 Geddes Axe reductions in educational expenditure and teachers' salaries, alienated many teachers. The Labour movement's genuine commitment to the progressive reform of education and its defence of teachers' conditions encouraged some teachers to participate actively in Labour politics.[1] Hannon certainly perceived the teachers' role to be a threat to Unionist hegemony. Each Unionist M.P., he urged, should make a special effort to conciliate the teachers, and he concluded:

> I attach an immense importance to doing everything in our power to establish a friendly understanding with the teachers. Conservatives have left them too much to the Socialists.

---

1. T.C., 2;3;1923.
2. BUA minutes, 12;12;1924.

2.5 The Industrial and Political Impact of Unemployment in Birmingham

Birmingham, despite its relative economic prosperity throughout the interwar period, was no stranger to mass unemployment. The graphs in Appendix D show this clearly but reveal too that Birmingham was, for the most part, more fortunate than the majority of areas and was, in particular, better placed than those towns such as Sheffield which were dependent on the pre-war staples of the British economy.

Initially though, Birmingham, as one of the centres of war-time munitions production, suffered more than most in the adjustment to condition of peace. All the trades of the district without exception had gone over to the production of military requirements and some 15,000 women had come into the town to make up for labour shortages due to conscription.[1] When War Office orders were discontinued, these female workers were summarily dismissed along with many of their male co-workers.[2] At the same time, there was little demand for the labour of the returning soldiers and by April 1919 Birmingham had the highest proportion of unemployment of any town in the country - a rate of 724 per 10,000 of the population compared to the national average of 240. 24,118 males and 37,387 females were officially registered as unemployed.[3]

There seems to have been no significant political response to this phenomenon. The suddenness of its arrival, the preponderance of female unemployment and the swift recovery that ensued in the post-war replacement boom are probably sufficient explanation for this. By the end of 1919, all the local industries reported heavy order books and full employment. The withdrawal of women from the labour market had also eased the situation.

But when the boom broke, it broke with a vengeance. In 1921, unemployment rocketed, reaching in June, due the exacerbating circumstance

---

1. R.H. Brazier, E. Sandford, Birmingham and the Great War, 1914-1919 (Birmingham, 1921), p. 137.
2. B.M., 20;11;1918.
3. B.M., 3;4;1919.

of a national coal strike, a figure of 91,458. There were in addition 46,881 on short time.[1] By this time, the Birmingham working-class movement was sufficiently organised and self-confident to seek to organise and politicise the vast army of unemployed. A rash of local committees of the unemployed were set up and numerous demonstrations and meetings arranged to mobilise and exploit the discontent of those without work. Between September, 4 and September, 14, the Home Office correspondent reported ten unemployed demonstrations in Birmingham in which probably some 3500 people participated.[2] The Labour Party took the lead in the establishment and direction of many of the committees, for example those formed in Sparkbrook and Rotton Park.[3] Characteristically, the best organised was that set up by the local Labour Party in King's Norton; its treasurer and secretary were employees of Cadburys and nearly all the money donated to it came from the workers of the Bournville factory.[4] The Unionists were not slow to blame these activities for the six gains registered by the Labour Party in the November municipal elections of 1921. The Unionist Chief Agent stated that:[5]

> There is no doubt that the heavy increase in the poll of the Labour Party is due to the fact that their Councillors and supporters, from the very first, unscrupulously exploited the grave industrial conditions of the moment. They pushed themselves forward into all movements in any way connected with the unemployed and lost no opportunity of making political capital out of the matter of the provision of work by the State and Municipality, and more especially the rates of pay, and of the allowances to those who continued to be unemployed. They attended all meetings of unemployed *[sic]* and even organised them...

The matter was not quite so simple, however, for there was a split among the local unemployed between the 'moderate men' of the Labour Party and the 'extremists' of the Communist Party, anxious to radicalise the movement.[6] This was given organisational form in the two city-wide bodies created to unify the unemployed. The Birmingham Unemployed Association opposed the use

---

2. CAB 24/128/3309, PRO; Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, no. 123.
3. T.C., 23;19;1921; 12;1;1923.
4. Bournville Works Magazine, October, 1923.
5. BUA minutes, 11;11;1921.
6. CAB 24/128/3350, PRO; Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, no. 125.
1. B.P., 16;6;1921.

of the workless for political gain and believed their first duty lay in the defence and improvement of the conditions of the unemployed within the present system of relief.[1] The Birmingham District Committee of the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement, led by the Communists, saw it as an obligation to draw the political lessons of unemployment so that the problem might not merely be relieved but actually solved. Not surprisingly, talks to arrange the fusion of the two bodies were abortive.[2] These political differences were also carried through to the Trades Council where an application for the free affiliation of the unemployed committees was refused in the not altogether unjustified belief that it was a move to increase Communist influence within the Council.[3]

The squabbling was to little avail for by the end of 1923 the unemployed committee movement was effectively dead except insofar as a few of the local bodies continued to act as relief committees.[4] The split itself was one reason for this because many unemployed workers were alienated by the apparent political exploitation of their grievances.[5] Another was the extent to which the police authorities of Birmingham acted ruthlessly to suppress any political agitation amongst the unemployed. In the early 1920s, the police in Birmingham regarded it as part of their duties to attend all public meetings of left-wing organisations in the town in order to check the expression of seditious utterances. At times, the practice reached absurd levels; in August, 1921, an unadvertised business meeting of the Washwood Heath Ward Labour Party Committee (called to discuss arrangements for the children's annual outing) was attended by two detectives.[6] But it was the Communist Party that suffered most; between 1920 and 1922, 35 Communists were arrested in Birmingham - at one stage,

---

1. T.C., 9;6;1922.
2. T.C., 24;2;1924.
3. BTC minutes, 27;1;1922; T.C., 3;2;1922.
4. T.C., 29;11;1922.
5. BTC minutes, 2;6;1922.
6. T.C., 26;8;1921.

Winson Green prison boasted a twelve-strong Communist Party branch![1] In 1923, the Home Office could conclude that 'in Birmingham the police activities had practically obliterated the /unemployed/ movement'.[2]

But the third and most significant reason was simply the decline in the numbers unemployed. From 1923, there was a slow but general economic recovery in which Birmingham shared. By early 1926, it was claimed that unemployment had reached the lowest level that could reasonably be expected in a major economic centre, and throughout the 1920s organisation amongst the unemployed was at a 'very low ebb'.[3] Any lasting or solid organisation was made more difficult by the very low incidence of long-term unemployment in the city. At the beginning of 1930, it was reported that 90 per cent of those on the registers had worked for at least 30 weeks in the previous two years. The unemployment register as a whole changed in personnel once every seven or eight weeks save for a few hundred of the old and disabled.[4] There were few amongst the unemployed, therefore, with either the ability to give any sustained commitment to the movement or the incentive given the good job prospects locally.

The General Strike and national coal strike of 1926 was a sharp but short-lasting break in the generally optimistic outlook for Birmingham. At its peak, in August, unemployment rose to 43,617 (12 per cent of the insured workforce) but the industrial troubles had no lasting impact and by the later 1920s joblessness in Birmingham was running at a rate below the national average.[5] The city, though, could not escape the effects of the 'economic blizzard' heralded by the Wall Street Crash. By September, 1931, unemployment stood at 74,872 (19.7 per cent of the insured workforce).[6]

On this occasion, the Communists had a free run; the hands of the

---

1. The Communist, 14;10;1923.
2. CAB24/160/202, PRO; Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom.
3. B.D., 9;1;1924; BTC minutes, 8;6;1925.
4. B.M., 1;1;1930.
5. Ministry of Labour Gazette, September, 1926.
6. ibid., October, 1931; Local Unemployment Index, October, 1931.

orthodox Labour movement were effectively tied by the fact that it was a Labour Government which was presiding, with little credit to its administrative talent or political ideals, over the economic mess. Agitation peaked at the end of 1931 when the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM) claimed to have organised six branches in Birmingham with a total membership of 1000.[1] Its most effective moment came in October when, according to Communist sources, some 20,000 people participated in a demonstration against cuts in relief which achieved the concession that benefits were to be made up to existing levels by the City Council.[2] Any hopes that such activities might redound politically to the advantage of the Communist Party were disappointed though. In the 1931 parliamentary elections, Bernard Moore, the local organiser of the NUWM amd Communist candidate in Duddeston, came third in the poll - above the New Party but 16,000 votes behind the victorious Unionist candidate. In fact, the Labour Government's mishandling of the economic crisis seems to have discredited the Left generally and contributed to a right-wing backlash which had little sympathy for the analyses and prescriptions of the Communist Party.

In attempting to assess the political impact of unemployment on working-class politics in Birmingham, we must look beyond the record of organisation and demonstration to examine the ways in which the mass of the unemployed reacted. 1921 was certainly a critical year - a year in which the sudden onset of mass unemployment and the perceived niggardliness of national and local authorities in dealing with the problem caused widespread discontent. But in 1922, as unemployment fell and as the relief system began functioning more smoothly, politicised expressions of mass resentment evaporated. Writing in early 1923, one observer could state that:[3]

> No criticisms at all have been levelled at the methods of administering relief in the city. There is very little bitterness

---

1. Birmingham Parliamentary Election Literature, BCL; NUWM leaflet, Duddeston, 1931.
2. NUWM Monthly Report Bulletin, October-November, 1931.
3. Colston Shepherd, op. cit., p. 125

> among the unemployed themselves. In fact, the general feeling throughout the city is one almost of stoicism. Unemployment is looked upon as a result of international upheavals; as a condition that can only be relieved by the efforts of the city itself...

This would seem to be a fair assessment. Unemployment only really became a political issue when the unemployed had concrete grievances and someone to blame. In Birmingham, the operation of this radicalising combination was, for the most part, minimised by local economic conditions and the local handling of relief arrangements.

2.6 The Local Economy of Sheffield

(i) The Heavy Industries

The heavy industries had come to dominate the economy of Sheffield even before 1914 and the First World War, with its demand for armaments and high-grade steel, merely consolidated the process by which they rose to preeminence. 37 new foundries were opened in Sheffield in the period during and shortly after the War but the expansive optimism of the time was soon shown to be full of hollow promise as steel became one of the industries hardest hit by the recession that began in 1920.[1]

The general economic conditions that damaged Britain's traditional staple industries have already been noted. The position of British steel makers vis-a-vis their foreign competitors was particularly difficult. The wartime devastation of large parts of the Continent had at least enabled Germany, France and Belgium to re-establish their steel industries on a more efficient basis by the installation of large-scale, up-to-date plant. Productivity in the British steel industry remained obstinately low, and the higher wages and social charges in Britain left the trade in a weak position on the international market.[2]

Sheffield's post-war production of steel ingots and castings actually outran the 1913 total in all but three years (1921, 1922 and 1926) but, once the feverish post-war boom subsided, the numbers employed fell dramatically.[3] In the last quarter of 1918, the iron and steelworks of Sheffield and Rotherham employed an average of 31,000 people; by 1931, this total was halved to an annual average of 15,000.[4]

The fate of the other major employer of labour in the heavy industrial sector of Sheffield, engineering, was integrally related to that of steel,

---

1. D. Burn, The Economic History of Steelmaking, 1867-1939 (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 358-60.
2. ibid., pp. 408-22.
3. A.D.K. Owen, A Report on Unemployment in Sheffield (Sheffield, 1932), p. 31.
4. Ministry of Labour Gazette, 1918-1931.

both processes often being carried out in the same firm. Engineering in Sheffield terms meant the manufacture of heavy mechanical parts and products sold to industry or the state rather than the domestic consumer. In recession, it was this area of production that was hit first and hardest by falling demand as industry and government retrenched.

Between 1923 and 1931, the insured workforce of the Sheffield engineering and engineers' iron and steel founding section fell from 21,571 to 14,050.[1] The decline was illustrated even more graphically by its impact on the major union catering for engineering workers - in 1921, there was an average of 5957 AEU members in employment in Sheffield; ten years later, the comparable figure stood at just 2832.[2]

For the coal industry, the post-war years were a period of great turmoil. 1919 and 1920 were years of unprecedented demand for British coal but in 1921 demand plummetted. At the same time, the Government withdrew its undertaking to guarantee profits as decontrol came into force on April, 1. Almost inevitably wage cuts ensued though they were not conceded by the miners until the failure of a 90 day national lockout. The coalowners' demands for further reductions in 1925 were at first averted by a nine month Government subsidy but on May, 1, when the new lower scales of remuneration came into force, a national strike began which lasted seven months. Eventually, the miners despite their own heroic resistance and the aborted General Strike on their behalf, were forced to accept wage cuts, longer hours and district agreements. Hopes for recovery in the later 1920s were dashed by the onset of the Great Depression during which domestic consumption and export demand reached a new low. In 1931, the mining industry employed 380,000 less workers than it had in 1920, and the rate of unemployment amongst miners stood at 28 per cent.[3]

---

1. Sheffield Social Survey Committee, miscellaneous materials, MD1228E.3, Ministry of Labour returns, 1923-1931.
2. S. Pollard, A History of Labour in Sheffield (Liverpool, 1959), p. 338.
3. M.W. Kirby, The British Coalmining Industry, 1870-1946 (1977), pp. 67, 139.

In nearly all respects, however, the South Yorkshire district was luckier than the other mining areas of Britain. Its thick and uniform seams enabled efficient and large-scale production, and its high quality coal was ideal for use in the public utilities and other sectors of the more stable domestic market. Output increased in the South Yorkshire field and in 1931, when it surpassed the chronically depressed and export-dependent South Wales field, it became the largest coal-producing area of Britain.[1] As a result, wages and conditions were generally better in South Yorkshire than in the older and less efficient areas, and in 1926 Yorkshire was one of only four districts that were able to negotiate a seven and a half hour day rather that the general eight hours.[2] But Sheffield miners, though to some extent shielded from the worst effects of coal's decline, were part of a national industry and national union. These circumstances ensured that they too suffered in the post-war convulsions of the coal industry.

(ii) The Light Trades

Though now outweighed by the heavy industrial sector, the light trades of cutlery, silverware and tool manufacture continued to be important local employers. In terms of the numbers employed, there was only a slight decline in the 1920s but to take the figures at face value would be to disregard the considerable upheaval and difficulties faced by the light trades during the decade.

Cutlery, for example, shared the pattern of boom and slump common to most industries. In May, 1920, The Times could report that 'the disappearance of [German] competition had brought about a wonderful change. All the world is crying for Sheffield knives and scissors'.[3] But the return of German competition and the trade collapse of 1920 brought severe

---

1. R.G. Neville, 'The Yorkshire Miners, 1881-1926: A Study in Labour and Social History', Ph. D. thesis, University of Leeds, 1974, pp. 30-32.
2. ibid., pp. 742-43.
3. The Times, 26;5;1920.

depression. The numbers employed by the firms of the Sheffield Cutlery Manufacturers' Association fell by over 2000 in the four years after 1920.[1] Thereafter, employment was largely static in the industry - standing at 8965 in 1924 and 8465 in 1930 (though these figures conceal the amount of short-time worked in the trade throughout the 1920s). The workforce in the jewellery and plate trade underwent a similar decline, falling from 8225 in 1924 to 7533 in 1930. Tool manufacture was slightly more fortunate in that the numbers fell by 200 only, from 13,445 in 1924 to 13,230 in 1930.[2]

(iii) The Local Economy of Sheffield, 1918-1931

There are two outstanding features of the Sheffield economy. One is the pronounced contrast and dichotomy between its two leading sectors - the large-scale heavy industries of steel and engineering, and the smaller-scale, still handicraft-based, light trades of cutlery and tool manufacture. The other is their overall predominance in the local industrial structure.

Table 2.6a Employment in Sheffield, 1921-1931

	1921			1931		
	Number employed	Male	Female	Number employed	Male	Female
Heavy trades	65724	61702	4022	47003	43343	3660
Light trades	41016	27751	13265	31643	19774	11869
All trades	202662	150494	52168	179892	125530	54362

Source: S. Pollard, A History of Labour in Sheffield (Liverpool, 1959), p.250; 1921, 1931 Census occupational tables.

---

1. Pollard, op. cit., p. 289.
2. Final Report of the Fourth Census of Production (1930); Part II, the Iron and Steel Trades...(1934).
   These returns apply to the West Riding as a whole but the trades were very much concentrated in Sheffield so the figures may be taken as representative.

Even with the decline in both sectors shown by the figures (for the 1931 Census counted only those actually in work), the metal-working industries clearly had a dominating influence in the city. In the 1920s, it could be reckoned that almost one half of Sheffield's workforce was directly dependent on the smelting or working of metal for its livelihood.

Conversely, as Sheffield was not situated on any major communications through-route and could not be considered a distribution centre for any but a small area immediately circumjacent, commercial life was relatively undeveloped. Though, of course, commerce and administration had grown to service the town's own needs, for a city of Sheffield's size, secondary and tertiary employment were disproportionately small. Sheffield was 'as nearly strictly primary as it is possible to find a large town', probably the 'largest purely manufacturing town in the country'.[1] Sheffield's dependence on one sphere of economic activity and under-developed commercial life stand in stark contrast to the diversity of Birmingham.

As to size of unit, the heavy industries were large-scale employers whose workers were concentrated in a few major companies. The point is amply illustrated if we examine the numbers employed by a few of the most important firms when they were operating at full capacity in the immediate post-war period. The Vickers River Don works employed some 7500, Hadfields 5000, Firths 5000, Steel, Peech and Tozers 5000, Edgar Allens 2400 and William Cookes 1120.[2] Short-time and unemployment in the later 1920s reduced these figures but the trade was one in which the production process was required, physically and economically, to be large-scale. Foundries were closed and workers laid off but the experience of the steel and engineering trades' workers was essentially one of large units.

---

1. P. Abercrombie, Sheffield: A Civic Survey (1924), p. 6.
2. Vickers Ltd., Short History of the Vickers Company (Sheffield, 1920), no pagination.
   S.D.I., 4;6;1919; 21;7;1924; 29;9;1919; 29;9;1919.
   Edgar Allen Works and Sports Magazine, September, 1920.

Table 2.6b Employment in Sheffield's Traditional Industries

	Companies making returns		Employees in W. Riding	Average no. of employees per W.Rid.firm
	Gt. Britain	W. Riding		
Cutlery	127	117	8465	72
Tools and implements	240	130	13230	102
Plate and jewellery	438	74	7533	102

Source: Final Report of the Fourth Census of Production (1930); Part II, The Iron and Steel Trades...(1934).

In the light trades, the picture was very different as the statistics above indicate. Small units remained and, indeed, there were economic circumstances that encouraged the persistence of small-scale production. In cutlery, the trade was divided by product and process: scissors, razors and the different types of knives were all manufactured by separate firms whilst specialist units concentrated on particular aspects of the production process. The advantage of this complex division of labour was that it enabled the larger firms to cope with a diversity of products without incurring the expense of the specialist equipment required for each.[1]

After the First World War, it was calculated that a skilled workman could establish himself in business for an outlay of just £5. If cheap rather than quality production was in demand, the small employers were particularly well placed to benefit as they could, with their lower labour costs and overhead charges, undercut the prices of their larger competitors.[2] In 1923, the Sheffield Chamber of Commerce reported that the little master was 'present with greater force and more vitality than ever'.[3] In any case, even in the larger firms many of the processes were still carried out by hand and there was a strong division of labour.

1. H. Townsend, 'The Structure and Problems of the Sheffield Cutlery Trade', District Bank Review, March, 1954, pp. 23-24.
2. ibid., pp. 24-25.
3. Sheffield Chamber of Commerce Journal, December, 1923.

The Sheffield silver and electro-plate and tool industries were closely allied trades with similar structures. In each, there were a number of large and well-known firms but these existed in a symbiotic relationship with many smaller companies, manufacturing in their own right and servicing the needs of their larger compatriots.

There was, thus, a clear schism in the industrial experience of the Sheffield working class. On the one hand, the numerically stronger trades, such as iron and steel and engineering, were par excellence those of large-scale industrial production. On the other, traditions of skill and handicraft production still influenced the workers of the light trades. While a third of the workforce could be said to belong to the industrial proletariat as classically defined, the traditions of the artisan, enfeebled though they were, lived on for a further fifth.

The participation of women in the heavy industries of Sheffield could be dismissed summarily as negligible. Less than one in twenty of the insured workers in the steel, coal and engineering sectors was female.[1] But, if women were debarred from the heavy trades by reasons of gentility and physique, their particular qualities were much in demand in the light. These were usually defined negatively - women were, or were thought to be, cheap and pliant labour for the unskilled and repetitive processes in cutlery and tool manufacture. In the 'precious metals and electro-plate' category of the 1921 Census, women actually outnumbered men in Sheffield but the true balance of power was shown by the fact that four fifths of the women were employed as buffers and polishers and almost half the men as smiths.[2]

In purely employment terms, this concentration in the less skilled sectors was of some advantage to the women workers of the light trades in the 1920s when there was a slight substitution of female for male labour.

---

1. Sheffield Social Survey Committee, miscellaneous materials, MD1228E.3; Ministry of Labour returns, 1923-1931.
2. Census of England and Wales, 1921. Yorkshire, Table 16.

Whilst this development was in part a manifestation of changing social attitudes, it was more directly the product of the industrial policies of the employers who were enabled by increasing mechanisation to replace their better-paid men with cheap female labour.[1] The overall statistics contained in the 1921 and 1931 Censuses show that the proportion of women in the total workforce of Sheffield rose from 25.8 per cent to 27.4 per cent a high figure but one still overshadowed by that of Birmingham.

---

1. Pollard, op. cit, p. 250.

2.7 Trades Unionism in Sheffield

(i) The Heavy Industries

During the First World War, the workers of Sheffield represented the very peak of trades union organisational strength and militancy in Britain. For a brief period after the War, they maintained this hard-won position until the heart of the local trade union movement was ripped out by the prolonged and severe depression of the 1920s.

To take iron and steel first, this was one sector where traditions of organisation were weak. No steel union was recognised by the employers until 1913 and it was only under the peculiar conditions of the First World War that the steel unions (combined since 1916 in the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation [ISTC]) were able to extend and tighten their grip. In 1914, the steel unions had just five branches with a combined membership not surpassing one or two hundred; by 1918, the ISTC could boast of 46 local branches with a total membership of 8750. In the conditions of trade prosperity and working-class militancy after the War, this number was further increased to 11,000 by 1920.[1]

Six years later, under the impact of unprecedented industrial recession, just 3500 members remained.[2] The 1926 coal strike exacerbated matters; in September, Walter Dodgson (local organiser of the ISTC) reported that just one Siemens open hearth furnace was working and many mills and forges were completely closed down.[3] At the end of the year, the subscribing membership of the ISTC in its Division Three (comprising Sheffield, Rotherham and Scunthorpe) had fallen by 84 per cent.[4]

---

1. J. Mendelson et al., Sheffield Trades and Labour Council, 1858-1958 (Sheffield, N.D.), p. 74.
2. S. Benton, 'Sheffield' in M. Morris (ed.), The General Strike (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 426.
3. ISTC Quarterly Report, September, 1926.
4. ibid., December, 1926.

Organisation improved somewhat as trade conditions improved. In 1927, Dodgson claimed that in the open hearth furnaces unionisation was 'comparatively good' but he could make no progress with the men who worked in the rolling mills and forges whose particularly intermittent form of employment made them especially difficult to organise.[1]

The ISTC, then, was crushed by the collapse of the steel trade in the 1920s. At the peak of its strength it probably represented some 75 per cent of the iron and steel production workers of Sheffield; by 1931, the proportion could not have been much above 25 per cent.[2] Many of its Sheffield members, hit hard by unemployment and lacking, in the words of Arthur Pugh, 'a real understanding of trades unionism', simply faded away.[3]

The National Union of Foundry Workers (NUFW), on the other hand, was a society enrolling skilled workers with a strong sense of their craft and power. In 1931, the Union listed 40 companies in Sheffield where foundry workers were employed of which 30 were 'Society' shops, employing and recruiting only NUFW members.[4] The NUFW was hit no less hard by the depression than was the ISTC. Its working membership fell by almost two thirds between October, 1920 and October, 1931 (from 2043 to 702) but its affiliated membership fell by only a half (from 2048 to 1102).[5] Clearly, it retained its organisational hold on the skilled workers in the foundries even though its industrial power was greatly weakened.

In the engineering trades, traditions of organisation reached back into the 19th. century but, here too, it was the First World War that brought trades unionism to a peak. The Amalgamated Society of Engineers had 3117 members in Sheffield in 1914; in 1920, through new affiliations and amalgamation, the AEU (as it now was) claimed a membership of 7771.[6]

---

1. ISTC Quarterly Report, March, June, 1927.
2. S.D.I., 26;8;1920.
3. A. Pugh, Men of Steel (1951), p. 487.
4. NUFW Monthly Journal and Annual Report, April, 1930.
5. NUFW Monthly Journal and Report, November, 1920, November, 1931.
6. Pollard, op. cit., p. 234, p. 338.

But thereafter, the decline in fortunes of the AEU was swift and sure. The immediate post-war slump in the munitions industry had already been used to weed out the active shop stewards in the Vickers works and elsewhere; the depression of the early 1920s provided renewed opportunities for the employers' counter-attack.[1]

In July, 1921, during the coal strike, over 50 per cent of the local members of the AEU were totally unemployed and even during the slight recovery that preceded the lock-out in March, 1922, the rate of unemployment only fell to a third.[2] During the lock-out itself, the number of AEU members out of work again rose to over 50 per cent (those engineers working for firms not belonging to the Engineering Employers' Federation were unaffected).[3] But the lock-out was only one ignominiously lost battle in the struggle to safeguard rights and conditions. The skirmishes continued but the AEU was in no position to withstand the onslaught and throughout the remaining six months of 1922 the pages of the AEU Monthly Journal record the dismissal of members and the victimisation of shop stewards. By 1926, the membership of the AEU in Sheffield had fallen to under 4000 and in 1931 it had fallen yet further under the impact of the Great Depression.[4]

The evidence suggests that the other skilled unions in the steel and engineering trades fared better than the Engineers. The Boilermakers and the United Society of Spring Fitters and Vicemen were able to report 100 per cent membership in all the major firms of Sheffield in which they organised in 1925.[5] It seems that where unions were able to retain control of a particular part of the production process through their monopoly of specialist skills, they were better able to maintain their membership and position. The skills that the AEU had once claimed as its prerogative had been superseded by machine production and the rise of semi-skilled labour.

---

1. The Socialist, 17;7;1919.
2. AEU Monthly Journal, July, 1921; S.D.I., 11;3;1921.
3. AEU Monthly Journal, May, 1922.
4. Benton, op. cit., p. 426; Pollard, op. cit., p. 338.
5. SFTLC minutes, Trade Union Organising Committee, July, 1925.

As to the unskilled workers of the heavy industries, their organisation was left to a variety of general unions - most importantly in the Sheffield area, the National Union of General Workers (NUGW) and the National Amalgamated Union of Labour (NAUL) which were amalgamated with the Municipal Employees' Association in 1924 to form the NUGMW. Even before 1914, the labourers of the East End works were better organised than any other comparable group in the country.[1] Their organisation, too, prospered during the War and, though no breakdown of their branches exists, the indications are that the NAUL and the NUGW, with area memberships of 25,000 and 14,000 respectively, had enrolled the bulk of the unskilled workers of the heavy trades by 1920.[2]

After this, statistics are hard to come by though, even as an act of omission, this silence suggests that all was not well. In the buoyant days of the War and post-war boom, trade unions regularly cited their membership and growth; officials were understandably less forthcoming in the period of decline after 1920. We know that the national TUC-affiliated membership of the NAUL fell from 170,000 in 1920 to 53,000 in 1924, whilst the NUGMW's membership fell from 359,697 on inception to 267,734 in 1931.[3] Lacking any harder evidence, we may make the reasonable assumption that trades unionism amongst the non-skilled workers declined at least as seriously as it did amongst the skilled.

In mining, the union was something more than an organisation to protect the economic interests of the industry's wage-earners; it also played a leading role in the social and political life of the area it served. By the 1920s, membership of the union had become an important element in gaining acceptance in the coalmining community. The social pressures to conformity may not have acted so sharply on the 6000 or so miners living in Sheffield itself but must have been considerable for the many living in the pit villages of Handsworth and Woodhouse. Certainly, in Yorkshire as a

---

1. C. Burke, 'Working-Class Politics in Sheffield, 1900-1920', Ph. D. thesis, Sheffield City Polytechnic, 1983, p. 61.
2. S.D.I., 26;8;1920.
3. H. Clegg, General Union (Oxford, 1954), p. 15, p. 28.

whole between 85 and 90 per cent of all mineworkers belonged to the Yorkshire Miners' Association (YMA) in the first half of the 1920s. The rate of membership fell by almost a half in the crisis year of 1926 but it is likely that it picked up considerably once more as labour relations stabilised in the latter part of the decade.[1]

A better guide to the organisational and financial strength of the YMA branches at the Sheffield pits is given by their participation in the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council. Affiliated membership rose from 1000 in 1920 to 1913 in 1926. The impact of the coal strike is clearly seen in the following year when just one branch with 540 members paid its subscriptions but by 1929 the enrolled membership had risen once more to 1270.[2] The figures are sufficient to indicate a certain resilience in the local branches considering the upheavals they were subject to in the 1920s.

(ii) The Light Trades

Before the First World War, the principal feature of the light trades was a strong tradition of trades unionism vitiated by an equally powerful sectionalism. In 1910, it was calculated that there were 17 trades societies in the cutlery trades, 7 in the tool trade and 6 in the file trade with a combined total membership of around 4000.[3] More rational organisation of the light trades began in 1913 when the table knife grinders and cutlers joined forces with the NAUL. The process continued apace until 1919 when the NAUL had absorbed some 20 local societies. The War also prompted other moves towards unity - the Cutlery Union, an amalgamation of three local unions, and the Sheffield Amalgamated Union of File Trades (SAUFT), comprising initially two societies, were both established in 1915. The other major union in the light trades, NUGSAT, which recruited principally amongst the workers of Sheffield's silver and electro-plate trades, had been formed in 1911 by the merger of seven Sheffield, six London and two

1. Neville, op. cit., p. 624, p. 748.
2. SFTLC Annual Reports, 1921-1931.
3. G.I.H. Lloyd, The Cutlery Trades (1913), p. 286.

Birmingham societies.[1]

Elsewhere sectionalism remained and a number of small societies, catering for highly specialised groups of workers, maintained a tenacious survival through the 1920s. As late as 1932, the Ministry of Labour listed 10 entirely local unions which organised in the cutlery and small tool sectors.[2]

The general picture found in the trade union movement of strength and growth after the War followed by a serious decline in the mid- and late 1920s applies equally to those societies organising in the light trades. The figures in 1920 and 1921 suggest that the NAUL and the Cutlery Union had enrolled almost two thirds of the local cutlery workforce whilst NUGSAT represented nearly three quarters of those workers employed in the silver and plate trades.[3] But in the eleven years to 1931, the Cutlery Union's membership plummetted from 2000 to just 320, and the SAUFT's membership fell from 2245 to 1386.[4] In the same period, the national membership of NUGSAT was more than halved so it is unlikely that the Sheffield branches of the Union fared any better than their counterparts in the cutlery and tool trades. Indeed, some of the smaller societies were rather more successful, especially where their members possessed skills essential in the manufacture of products for which there was a steady demand. The membership of the Wool Shear Workers' Trade Union, for example, actually increased - from 81 in 1921 to 108 in 1931.[5] In 1925, it organised 90 per cent of the workers employed in the five firms engaged in the trade.[6]

Generally, the situation for the unions was not so bright. Sidney Pollard has estimated that by 1930 only one in five of the workers of the cutlery trades belonged to a trade union.[7] The establishment of a Trade

---

1. Pollard, op. cit., pp. 219-20, p. 298.
2. Ministry of Labour, Directory of Employers' Associations, Joint Organisations, etc., 1932 (1932), p. 97.
3. S.D.I., 23;7;1921; 31;1;1920.
4. Report of the Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies; Part C, Trade Unions, 1920-1931.
5. ibid.
6. SFTLC minutes, Trade Union Organising Committee, July, 1925.
7. Pollard, op. cit., p. 299.

Board for the cutlery trades in 1933 provides a fitting commentary on the slow but steady forced retreat of the unions from the position of strength that they occupied in 1920.

Trade conditions must inevitably play the major part in explaining this decline but another, not unconnected, reason was the considerable deskilling of the light trades' workforce and the substitution of women for men that was occurring in the 1920s. The institute of apprenticeship was dying out and to many of the new women workers their employment was a job - often short-term - rather than a craft or career. The craft societies' ability to assimilate and socialise new members was being superseded and their reaction was more often a grudging refusal to accept the new realities than any positive attempt to meet and adapt them. Only in exceptional cases could a policy of outright opposition to the employment of women succeed. The Pen and Pocket Blade Forgers' Protection Society was able to restrict women to a few specified processes and retained a largely static membership (of around 70 to 80) in the 1920s.[1] Few other societies still had this sort of power.

As to the general question of the organisation of women, in the heavy trades it was a topic that hardly arose but in the light trades - where women formed a third of the workforce - it was an issue of some importance. A large number of women joined unions for the first time during the First World War - the Sheffield membership of the National Federation of Women Workers rose from 350 before 1914 to 5000 in 1918.[2] To some extent, these gains were lost as munitions work and female employment were run down after the War but it represented a solid base to build on. If, too, NUGSAT was organising 5000 of the 7000 silver and plate workers by 1920, a large proportion of these must have been women for the trade was split fifty-fifty

---

1. Committee on Trade and Industry, Survey of Metal Industries (1928), p. 264. Membership figures based on affiliation to SFTLC; see Annual Reports.
2. Mendelson et al., op. cit., p. 74.

between the sexes.[1]

But by the mid 1920s, the women's organiser of the NUGMW was forced to admit that her efforts to extend organisation among women were meeting with very little success; rather, the story was of lapsed memberships lost as a result of the slump or, in some cases, because Trade Boards had been set up to oversee working conditions.[2] The fact that union memberships were falling at a time when the proportion of women in the workforce was rising seems to indicate a lack of success, and probably in many of the craft societies a lack of effort, in the recruitment of women.

(iii) Non-Industrial Sectors

As regards the various non-industrial sectors, the position in Sheffield was essentially similar to that in Birmingham and may be summarised quite quickly. Of the workers employed by Sheffield Corporation, nearly all the transport staff belonged to the Tramway and Vehicle Workers' Union and subsequently the TGWU, and a large proportion of the others were organised by the NAUL until 1924 and the NUGMW thereafter.[3] On the railways, unionisation was effectively 100 per cent (as evidenced by the complete success of the 1919 and 1926 strikes), and in the Post Office UPOW had 1000 of the 1200 postal and telegraphic workers.[4] Where workers were employed by national or local government or where they were engaged in the provision of official or quasi-official services, they had both the incentive and the possibility to organise themselves thoroughly.

---

1. S.D.I., 31;1;1920.
2. SFTLC minutes, Trade Union Organising Committee, July, 1925.
3. SFTLC records, General Strike collection; H. Fearnley to members of the Tramways Committee, 10;5;1926.
   Clegg, op. cit., p. 15.
4. SFTLC minutes, Trade Union Organising Committee, July, 1925.

2.8 Workplace Influence on Political Attitudes in Sheffield

(i) Small-Scale Manufacture

The split between large and small units of production was unusually marked in Sheffield and was, as we have seen, one that had considerable impact in the sphere of trade union politics. The largest body of support for the Lib-Lab Sheffield Federated Trades Council came from the unions of the light trades whereas it was the organisations of the heavy trades which were predominant in the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council. This division was also manifest in the 1918 General Election when the local leader of the NAUL, Cllr. Albert Bailey, stood as as Independent Labour candidate in Central constituency against the British Socialist Party candidate, R.G. Murray, who was backed by the Trades and Labour Council. In the event, Bailey was defeated but, as he gained over 5300 more votes than his left-wing rival, it seems that his moderate and 'patriotic' attitudes reflected those of a large number of light trades workers resident in the central wards.

Bailey accepted the Labour whip on the Council in 1919 but he remained basically a Liberal and his fiercely independent line did not make cooperation easy.[1] By 1922, he had been expressly designated a political opponent.[2] Alderman William Wardley, first elected to the Council in 1890 and serving as a councillor and alderman until his death in 1941, was another representative of the light trades who, though briefly a member of the Labour Group after the War, stayed sturdily and independently Liberal in his politics.[3]

But, without dismissing these exemplars of an important tradition in the Sheffield Labour movement, it can be said that by the 1920s they were part of a pre-war generation whose significance was fading. This was shown

---

1. SFTLC minutes, 11;11;1919.
2. H. Keeble Hawson, Sheffield. The Growth of a City (Sheffield, 1968), p. 296.
3. ibid., pp. 334-35.

most clearly by the successful fusion in 1920 of the two trades councils. All the light trades' unions joined the new Federated Trades Council and, though the amalgamation had taken place on the express understanding that industrial and political functions were to be separated, the fusion undoubtedly represented an important step in securing a united and Labour-oriented trades union movement in Sheffield.

The only significant break in this united front came in 1923 when a ballot of members of the Cutlery Union (led by Alderman Wardley) voted against affiliation to both the national Labour Party and the local Trades Council.[1] This position held until 1930, by which time Warley had retired, when the Union applied to join up once more with both the national and local Labour movement.[2]

The Cutlery Union was an exception to the general picture which suggests that by the 1920s the light trades' unions saw the Labour Party as the best medium of their political aspirations. The other extreme was represented by the Pen and Pocket Blade Forgers' Protection Society which affiliated its 70 to 80 members to both the national Labour Party and the Trades and Labour Council throughout the 1920s and was firm in its commitment to Labour and wider working-class interests.[3] Between these two poles, the light trades' societies generally seem to have shared a common understanding that the Labour Party was now the representative political organ of the wider Labour movement to which they felt a basic loyalty. Five Labour councillors were union officials or workers in the light trades which in itself suggests that the unions of the traditional industries had been successfully integrated into the political wing of the independent working-class movement.

It is never entirely satisfactory to depend on the evidence of trade union politics but there is a regrettable dearth of other firm information on the politics of the small trades' workers. The municipal election results

---

1. SFTLC minutes, 11;8;1923.
2. National Labour Party, NEC minutes, 26;2;1930; SFTLC minutes, 7;1;1930.
3. PPBFPS minutes, passim.

in Walkey and Crookesmoor, wards in which large numbers of light trade artisans were resident, do enable us, however, to conclude that Labour sympathies, though strong and becoming stronger, were not yet overwhelming. In Walkley, in particular, a continuing tradition of Liberal and Independent politics was powerful.

In seeking to explain the workplace derivation of such political attitudes, the usual strictures on the conservatising influence of small-scale industry may be endorsed. In no case were the light trades' societies known for their left-wing politics; rather, they represented a strain of artisanal respectability, identifying always with labour interests but not usually viewing industrial and political militancy as the best way to defend these. The ambiguous legacy of the light trades' societies' contradictory 19th. century traditions - the fierce unilateral defence of their industrial interests, and their political moderation and class collaboration - could successfully be accommodated in a Labour Party whose prime rationale was always a commitment to the independent defence of working-class interests rather than any political ideology.

In Sheffield, as in Birmingham, the localised nature of the traditional industries and the narrow allegiances this fostered were important but the context was very different. In Sheffield, the whole balance of social and political power was tilted towards the working class, a situation which not only encouraged psychologically the independent defence of working-class interests but also made it a far more attractive and tenable political and industrial strategy.

(ii) Large-Scale Manufacture

A major element in this balance of power was the mass of heavy trades' workers who dominated the East End of the city. Their early commitment to independent working-class politics was, as we noted, radicalised yet further by the exigencies of war but the organisational legacy of the Shop Stewards'

movement after the War was slight. By 1922, the shop stewards' network had been shattered by unemployment and victimisation. The political legacy is harder to assess. At one level, the movement became to some extent politically isolated by its total commitment to the newly-formed Communist Party - the Sheffield Workers' Committee joined the local branch of the Party en bloc in 1920.[1] At another, through the heritage in popular consciousness of the wartime militancy and, more directly, through the continued prominence of some of its leading personnel, the Shop Stewards' movement remained an important influence on the political life of Sheffield in the post-war years.

The principal base of the shop stewards had been the AEU but the Union had been all but destroyed as a force capable of influencing the course of industrial relations by the employers' counter-attack. Nevertheless, the AEU retained the loyalties of a large, if declining, membership and, though defeated, it was not conciliated. If anything, the industrial relations troubles after 1918 seemed to reinforce the message of the wartime radicalism and encouraged a considerable industrial and political militancy.

This was exemplified in the 1922 lock-out when a mass meeting of engineers in firms unaffected by the dispute voted by a two to one majority that members working in non-Federated firms should be called out too. Twelve members of the Sheffield AEU District Committee were suspended by their national executive when they sought to enforce this decision.[2] After the defeat in 1922, such militancy had to take more political forms but, if we are to take resolutions to the Trades and Labour Council as a guide, the AEU had by far the most militant and left-wing membership of any local union.

Such evidence, of course, reflects the views of an activist minority but the record suggests that it was a numerically large section in the AEU which was operating in an environment tolerant and supportive of its analyses

1. SCP minutes, 18;8;1920.
2. S.D.I., 1;6;1922.

and demands. The engineering workers were radicalised by their experience of work, radicalised in particular by their defence of craft privilege, ideologised as workers' control, against a hostile and aggressive management. As craft traditions became obsolescent and traditional work solidarities ineffectual, many members of the AEU turned to left-wing politics as offering a means to re-assert their rights and dignities as workers.

The National Union of Foundry Workers was another union in which defence of craft privilege was transmuted into support for radical politics. The president of the Sheffield branch, J.T. Baker, was a leading activist in the Minority Movement and the branch itself was affiliated to the Minority Movement, International Class War Prisoners' Aid, and the Friends of Soviet Russia - all of which were effectively Communist front organisations.[1]

While the scale of workplace clearly had some impact in fostering the radical political attitudes of these work groups, the more important factor seems to have been a sectional craft consciousness. That the experience of large-scale industry could be interpreted quite differently by groups lacking strongly defined craft interests is illustrated by the case of the ISTC.

The Sheffield divisional organiser of the ISTC, Moses Humberstone, was a Liberal councillor for Darnall and the secretary of the Federated Trades Council and though he joined the Labour Group in 1919 he remained firmly on the right of the Party. In this he was emulated by his fellow-organiser, Walter Dodgson, who, as a trades unionist, was always keen to stress the necessity of conciliatory relations between the two sides of industry.[2] If the numerous reports of the ISTC branch annual dinners are to be taken at face value, his attitude appears to have been widely held in the industry for representatives of the employing companies were always honoured guests.

---

1. NUFW, Sheffield Committee minutes, 28;4;1926; 3;3;1926; 29;2;1929.
2. Man and Metal, April, 1927.

The difference between the craft consciousness of the AEU and the occupational pride of the ISTC seems to lie in the fact that that the latter could encompass the firm as a whole. Probably the ISTC felt less sharply the threats to traditional work practices that so concerned the craft unions. More importantly, the management and many of the workers of the great firms of Sheffield seem to have shared a common pride in the good name of the company and the high reputation of Sheffield steel. In apparently unlikely circumstances, a tradition of identification with one's job and one's employers had developed which the managements took some care to foster through the works councils they set up and the welfare and recreational activities they encouraged.[1]

On the other hand, though the iron and steel workers seem not to have been class conscious in any very radical sense, they were undoubtedly Labourist in politics. In the late 1920s, Division Three of the ISTC (of which Sheffield formed a major part), had a rate of contracting-in to pay the political levy to the Labour Party of 61 per cent, compared to the national average of just 37 per cent.[2] The conservatism of the iron and steel workers may not have pleased their more left-wing fellow-workers but they too took their place in the famed broad church of the Labour Party, even if they applied a somewhat less Calvinistic logic to the question of class relations.

Of all the different sections of the British working class, none, by the 1920s, was more firmly and solidly Labour than the miners. The ward politics of Handsworth and the return of Thomas Grundy, the YMA-sponsored candidate, in every parliamentary election in the Rother Valley (to which constituency Handsworth belonged) from 1918 to 1931 are sufficient proof of this.

---

1. Daniel Doncasters, William Cookes and Edgar Allens all possessed works councils and published works magazines.
2. ISTC miscellaneous records, P63a; Membership, Branches, Political Levy (N.D.).

The miners were a group which, more than any other in the private sector, looked towards sympathetic state regulation and ultimately the socialisation of the mines as their industrial salvation. When the intervention of the state in right-wing hands proved unsympathetic, it is not surprising that the miners' loyalties to the Labour Party which had been forged before the War became even more rigid and solidaristic after it. The betrayal of apparent promises to nationalise the mines in 1919, decontrol and wage cuts in 1920, and, most notoriously, the Conservative Government's handling of the 1926 coal strike were not actions calculated to endear the politics or the politicians of the Right to the average miner. Working conditions in the mines and the tightly-knit nature of the mining communities fostered a cohesive and powerful sense of mining identity. Labour politics became one aspect of this totality.

(iii) Non-Industrial Sectors

The railway workers had analogous political reasons for their support of the Labour Party and were wholehearted in their commitment to the Sheffield Labour movement. Throughout the 1920s, the average number of railway workers (in all unions) affiliated to the Trades and Labour Council was 3139 at a time when there were little more than 3400 actually resident in Sheffield.[1] More direct support of the political wing of the Labour movement was channelled through the Railwaymen's Municipal Council (a coordinating body for all the local branches of the various unions) which spent £1600 on municipal election candidatures between 1919 and 1928.[2] Much of this was spent on the railwaymen's own candidates; 11 of Sheffield's Labour councillors were railway workers in the 1920s which meant that this workgroup provided one in six of Labour's elected representatives whilst forming just one in seventy of the local workforce.

In general, the railway worker politicians, predominantly members of the NUR, were fairly middle-of-the-road in contemporary Labour Party terms.

1. Calculated from SFTLC Annual Reports and 1921 Census.
2. SFTLC minutes, 23;10;1928.

The members of ASLEF, however, appear to have been somewhat more left-wing and even syndicalist in their politics. In 1920, the ASLEF no. 1 branch in the city passed resolutions calling for workers' control of both the railways and the mines and in succeeding years it several times demanded industrial action to achieve political ends.[1] The ignominious downfall of the second Labour Government confirmed its syndicalist distaste for conventional politics and, in 1931, the branch recorded its desire that the leadership 'use the strength of the union industrially and leave politics alone as they merely sidetrack the members and delude them into a false security'.[2]

Of course, the perennial question arises as to how far trade union branch resolutions are representative of the membership as a whole. It is to be doubted that the 500 or so members of ASLEF in Sheffield were all convinced syndicalists but the branch undoubtedly did share a strong self-identity (exemplified in the ASLEF club built and funded by the members themselves) and industrial militancy (shown in the success of the 1924 ASLEF strike in Sheffield).[3] It seems fair to regard the branch resolutions as one expression, albeit a somewhat extreme one, of the locomotive drivers' commitment to their trade and perception of their industrial interests. In this atmosphere, syndicalist sympathies should not be considered an 'extremist' aberration but as a manifestation of occupational pride and self-regard. Though ASLEF cannot properly be thought of as a craft union, it shared with the skilled unions described earlier a belief in its own members special status and abilities.

The Corporation workers had a less exalted view of their calling but a strong political interest in the defence of their conditions. As in Birmingham, the earliest independent Labour councillors were Corporation workers and the tradition continued into the interwar period when Cllr.

---

1. ASLEF no. 1 minutes, 12;12;1920; 18;1;1920.
2. ibid., 20;9;1931.
3. Workers' Dreadnought, 11;8;1923; S.D.I., 21;1;1924.

Fred Marshall and Cllr. Frank Thraves (NUGMW and TGWU organisers respectively) were both Labour representatives. The Corporation workers were generally moderate men but being, as it were, living examples of the successful operation of Municipal Socialism,it is not surprising that they looked primarily to Labour to safeguard their political interests.

Post Office workers too were sturdily Labour. Three Labour councillors were postal workers, the expenses of one of them being partially met by UPOW.[1] The Union also regularly affiliated its entire local membership of around 800 to the Trades and Labour Council and marked its forced departure in 1927 with a valedictory 1000.[2]

Finally, we noted in the case of Birmingham the marked Labour sympathies of many teachers - an observation that applies even more forcefully in Sheffield. This partly reflects the more conducive atmosphere for left-wing politics in the city but it was a reaction too to the extreme parsimony of the Citizens' Association-controlled City Council in its educational provision and the deteriorating pay and conditions of teachers that were particularly noticeable in the town.[3] The Sheffield Teachers' Labour Group was established in 1923 and was granted a regular column in the Labour newspaper, Sheffield Forward, to put its arguments for better education facilities. The Teachers' Labour Group affiliated 76 members to the Trades and Labour Council in its peak year of 1927 but probably a greater impact was made by the fact that four Labour councillors in the 1920s were either teachers or ex-teachers.[4]

---

1. SCoP records, CPR7; Municipal elections (Hillsborough constituency) Neepsend ward, 1929.
2. SFTLC Annual Reports.
3. Keeble Hawson, op. cit., p. 90.
4. SFTLC Annual Report, 1927.

2.9 The Industrial and Political Impact of Unemployment in Sheffield

Unemployment was a massive and chronic problem in Sheffield in the interwar period and it undoubtedly played a major role in determining the town's political evolution. Unemployment in itself teaches no political lessons; it can lead to activism or apathy depending on the way in which its victims understand and analyse their plight. It was the strength of the Sheffield working-class movement that it was, to a large extent, able to inculcate a political comprehension and reaction to unemployment in which the ideas of the Left played a leading part.

Sheffield adapted well after the War and prospered in the short post-war trade revival. In July, 1920, unemployment was deemed to be as low as possible in a town of Sheffield's type.[1] But the national coal strike of October that year signalled an end to the post-war boom and thenceforth recovery was never to be any more than partial until the late 1930s. The metal trades of Sheffield, in which coal was an essential raw material, were always hit early and hard by any stoppage in the coal industry; in this instance , 5000 men had been laid off from the East End works within three days of the strike's commencement and unemployment trebled.[2] Unemployment, however, did not ease with the strike's cessation. In fact, it continued to rise until in July, 1921, as another national coal strike took full effect, it stood at an all-time peak of 69,300.[3] In this period, the Sheffield Poor Law Union dealt with over 12,000 cases of emergency out-relief and it was estimated that one in five of the local population was in receipt of benefit.[4]

The political reaction to this trauma was swift and strong though, as

---

1. S.D.T., 17;7;1920.
2. S.D.I., 19;11;1920.
3. S.D.I., 7;7;1921.
4. Royal Commission on Unemployment Insurance, 1931; Minutes of Evidence, Memorandum of the Views of the Sheffield City Council, Chart B.

in Birmingham, it was not unemployment as such that sparked off the fiercest discontents but the indignities that the condition attracted. A particular source of grievance was the Government stipulation that those drawing relief should undertake some form of task work. The unemployed movement in Sheffield organised a number of protests against the task work regulations. These began as simple marches and demonstrations but progressed to more sophisticated means of cocking a snook at the system, as on the occasion when 1000 jobless men presented themselves simultaneously for task work - a number with which the Guardians were quite unable to cope. More generally, the men were entitled to time off to visit the labour exchange and there is evidence that this proviso was used systematically in order to render task work controls ineffective.[1]

The largest single demonstration occurred in June, 1921, when up to 50,000 gathered outside the Town Hall to protest at cuts in the Board of Guardians' scale of relief. The crowd was such that the mayor was forced on to the balcony of the Hall to promise that he would visit the Minister of Health immediately to seek some improvement in the new scales. Within 36 hours the Minister had, indeed, undertaken to defer the cuts for one month.[2] Such strength and apparent success must have been exhilarating for the unemployed and for a short period perhaps it did seem, as the Sheffield Forward claimed, that 'they were the real rulers of the city'.[3]

In August, further demonstrations took place against Government cuts and local regulations debarring single men from relief work. Up to 5000 men blocked off the city centre for several hours before assembling outside the offices of the Sheffield Daily Telegraph (which had been notably unsympathetic to their cause) where they were broken up by a police baton charge.[4] Further mass demonstrations occurred when those arrested were brought to trial.[5]

---

1. S.D.I., 19;3;1921.
2. S.D.I., 14;6;1921; 15;6;1921.
3. S.F., July, 1921.
4. S.D.I., 13;8;1921; The Times, 13;8;1921.
5. The Times, 18;8;1921.

The City Council did little to soothe local discontent when, in September, they issued 2600 summonses for rate arrears and stated that there were 10,000 more in the pipeline.[1] The Council had abolished compounding (by which landlords collected rates in return for a 25 per cent allowance) in March; now, six months later, many thousands of the unemployed and others found themselves quite unable to meet the sudden large bills that arrived through the post.[2] Further protests forced the Council to defer the issuing of the summonses and agree an installment system for payment.[3] In the 1921 municipal elections, Labour gained five seats and a Communist, Albert Smith, standing as an Unemployed candidate won St. Philip's ward.

Unemployment was alleviated somewhat by the ending of the coal dispute but by June, 1922, as the engineering lock-out took full effect, the numbers unemployed had risen once more to 49,605.[4] If those involved in the industrial action are included too, the number out of work stood at 75,000.[5] Once again, over one in five of the population was dependent on poor law assistance.[6]

Under these conditions, the unemployed and their organisations continued to be an important part of the life of Sheffield, and the lock-out was a means by which the grievances of those in work and those out were brought together and they were encouraged to take part in a common struggle. Demonstrations of the engineers and unemployed demanding better treatment from the local authorities, some 4000 to 5000 strong, took place in both March and June.[7] The good organisation of the unemployed was shown too in the tragic events of the so-called Battle of Walkley which occurred in June. A crowd of around 1000 gathered to prevent the eviction of an ex-serviceman

---

1. S.D.I., 8;9;1921; S.F., October, 1921.
2. Keeble Hawson, op. cit., p. 35.
3. S.F., October, 1921.
4. S.D.I., 10;6;1922.
5. Sheffield Year Book, 1923, p. 62.
6. S.D.T., 29;12;1922.
7. S.D.I., 14;3;1921; 27;4;1922.

and his family. In the skirmish with the police that ensued one demonstrator lost his life. His funeral, twelve days later, was the occasion of a further mass demonstration when 5000 mourners paid their final respects to their fallen comrade.[1]

Turning to the politics of the unemployed movement, the picture is a little confused. A majority of the most important leaders of the local unemployed were Communists but there were also currents, both to the left and right, that were opposing Communist attempts to dominate the movement.

The Communist view of their role was well summed up by their local leader, G.H. Fletcher:[2]

> The unemployed were the only fighting element in the working class, the organised workers had suffered the onslaughts of capital without resistance and therefore this fighting spirit should be developed by putting [the] right men in [the] right place.

But, at times, Communist attempts to achieve this goal were a little crude. In 1922, elections were held to select committees to run four vestry halls whose use had been ceded to the unemployed. In Attercliffe and Meersbrook, the Communist candidates were successful but in Burngreave Cllr. Albert Smith was selected chairman.[3] Smith had severed his connection with the Communist Party and was now closely involved with the Labour Group.[4] Perhaps even worse in Communist eyes was the fact that Frank Horsfield, secretary of the Sheffield Communist Workers' Group (an ultra-left body deriving from Sylvia Pankhurst's Workers' Socialist Federation), was elected president in Crookesmoor. Having failed to gain total control of the committees, the Communist Party rather petulantly withdrew completely in order to regroup and reorganise outside.[5] This was recognised within a short space of time to have been, in the words of George Fletcher, 'a colossal blunder'.[6]

---

1. J. Baxter, The Battle of Walkley (Sheffield, 1983), passim.
2. SCP minutes, 10;5;1922.
3. ibid., 13;5;1922.
4. ibid., 3;5;1922.
5. ibid., 13;5;1922.
6. ibid., 16;5;1922.

To some extent, these actions had created space that people to the left of the Communist Party could exploit. One of the most active in this regard was A. Carford who masterminded the unemployed's unofficial seizure of a hall in February, 1922. The Unemployed District Committee, which condemned the action, earned only the contempt of Carford for its lack of genuine revolutionism - the committee men were supposed to be red-hot revolutionaries, he stated, 'they had, however, only been sentenced for making speeches and not for any direct action'.[1] In March, 1922, Carford was arrested for the illegal possession of fire-arms but he claimed rather tamely that they had only been brought to him to mend.[2]

But despite the zealous work put in by the far Left, it was the Labour Party which continued to be the principal representative of the working class as a whole, whilst within the narrower confines of unemployed politics the Communist Party regained its preeminence when Len Youle became secretary of the local branch of the Unemployed Workers' Movement in 1923. The organisation was never merely the mouthpiece of the current Party line, though, and Youle was able to retain his position as the recognised leader of the local workless even after his resignation from the Communist Party in the late 1920s.[3] Another important development at this time was the founding of a women's section of the unemployed movement which, by December, 1924, was claiming a membership of over 700.[4]

In the mid-1920s, unemployment steadied somewhat with the exception of the turbulent year of 1926 when the numbers on the register rose to 44,000 in June.[5] Sheffield's tragedy was that even in the relatively good years unemployment stayed at a stubborn 15 to 20 per cent of the workforce. The general depression in the local economy also meant that unemployment tended to be long-term; of the men wholly unemployed in December, 1930,

---

1. Workers' Dreadnought, 23;2;1922.
2. Workers' Dreadnought, 23;5;1922.
3. 'An Interview with Len Youle', Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History, 20, (Spring, 1970), p. 37.
4. S.F., December, 1924.
5. Ministry of Labour Gazette, July, 1926.

6.2 per cent had been totally without work for over three years, a further 23.9 per cent had had no work for over twelve months.[1]

There was, then, still plenty of scope for activity with the unemployed and in many ways the real service that the activists of the working-class movement performed for those without work lay not in the demonstrations and mass actions but in the plodding representative work before the Guardians' Rota Committees and Ministry assessors. In this area, beyond the clash of political interests and ideology, a real united front was possible. In 1921, the Federated Trades and Labour Council agreed to allow the Unemployed District Committee free representation at its executive and delegate meetings and was granted in return representation on the Unemployed Committee's executive.[2] Such cooperation was further exemplified by the occasional conferences arranged by the Trades Council between the Board of Guardians' and City Council Labour Groups and the unemployed.[3] But the clearest case of joint action across party lines occurred in the Sheffield Board of Guardians where for three years between 1922 and 1925 George Fletcher was leader of the Labour Group.

Two circumstances combined to bring such fruitful collaboration to an end. One was the Communist Party's adoption of the New Line in 1928 by which they treated Labour as the third capitalist party. This led to the Sheffield Labour Party retaliating by expelling George Fletcher and the other Communist Guardian, Mrs. Annie Cree, from the Board of Guardians' Labour Group, and to the Trades and Labour Council putting an end to the dispensation allowing representation to the Unemployed District Committee.[4]

The second was the disastrous performance of the second Labour Government in office. Trade slumped catastrophically in the Great Depression and in May, 1931 unemployment in Sheffield again reached over 60,000 - a figure which meant that one in three of the local workforce was

---

1. A.D.K. Owen, A Report on Unemployment in Sheffield (Sheffield, 1932), p.58
2. SFTLC minutes, 13;12;1921.
3. ibid., 5;1;1924; 5;7;1927.
4. ibid., 12;6;1928; 26;3;1929.

unemployed.[1]

The position of the orthodox Labour movement was awkward. They were only too well aware of the Government's failings but they realised the difficulties of its situation and were unwilling to criticise their own men and give apparent credence to their political opponents. The Communist Party had no such inhibitions and the Sheffield section of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement was active in fighting for better conditions for the local unemployed. A demonstration organised by the NUWM against the Trades Council in January, 1931 was intended to bring home to the local Labour movement its culpability in the serious state of affairs that prevail

There were many Labour activists, grown weary of defending an unsuccessful Labour administration, to whom the formation of the National Government came almost as a relief. But, in some ways, this marked only the beginning of the Sheffield Labour movement's problems because it was the Labour-controlled Public Assistance Committee that was responsible for implementing the National Government's proposed cuts in the scale of relief. In an attempt to meet their legal obligations whilst maintaining a generous system of benefits, Sheffield's Labour Council decided to bring down the scales of relief in line with Government regulations, undertaking at the same time to make up the reductions for those with dependents and with no additional source of income by the granting of discretionary benefit. It was a well-meaning strategy but a complicated one to put over and it did mean that for some there would be reductions in the support they received.

The Council's attempts to placate both sides of the equation earned it few bouquets. It was censured by the Trades and Labour Council and the Communists established a 'Council of Action' to coordinate protest.[3] In October, demonstrations, 4000 to 5000 strong, were organised against the cuts the particular target being Cllr. William Asbury, the Labour chairman of the

---

1. Ministry of Labour Gazette, June, 1930; Local Unemployment Index, June, 1930.
2. S.D.I., 28;1;1931.
3. SFTLC minutes, 29;9;1931; S.D.I., 5;10;1931.

Public Assistance Committee, who was pursued relentlessly by the Communist-led demonstrators.[1]

Politically, these attacks brought no reward to the Communist Party. In the municipal elections, nine Communist candidates won a total of 2035 votes; even the redoubtable George Fletcher won only 499, insufficient to prevent the Labour incumbent retaining the seat. Overall, though, Labour lost eight seats to Coalition opponents. In the parliamentary elections, the two Communist candidates fared little better though it might be claimed as success of a sort that Fletcher's 2790 votes in Attercliffe were enough to make possible the National Conservative candidate's defeat of C.H. Wilson by 165 votes. Attercliffe thus went Conservative for the first, and so far the only, time in its history. The rest of Sheffield followed.

Unemployment was always a highly politicised problem in Sheffield. It affected directly or indirectly nearly all the city's inhabitants and its chronic and pervasive nature meant that there could be no solace in the expectation of 'good times just around the corner', nor much hope of individual salvation. It was the Labour movement's success in the 1920s to inform this discontent with a left-wing analysis of unemployment's causes and remedies. The revolutionary Left was in the forefront of the agitation amongst the unemployed, but it was the constitutional Left which gathered their votes. It was the ultimate failure of the Labour movement, whatever justified excuses are made on its behalf, to have betrayed this trust and seemingly invalidate the critique on which it rested by its failure in office between 1929 and 1931. The Labour movement had always held governments to blame for unemployment. Now this blame was attached all the more firmly to a Labour Government that had actually promised to solve the problem.

---

1. S.D.I., 22;10;1931; 23;10;1931.

2.10 Conclusion

It is now necessary to draw together the threads of the preceding chapters in order to attempt some overall assessment of the impact of economic influences on the nature of working-class politics in Birmingham and Sheffield and, in so doing, form a partial explanation of the political differences between the two towns.

One fundamental contrast between Birmingham and Sheffield lay in their very different economic structures. Birmingham possessed a thoroughly diversified economy. Its new and traditional industries, booming and depressed trades, large and small units all went to form a highly heterogeneous local economy which, despite the growing importance of car manufacture, had as yet no dominating motif. Its reputation as 'The City of a Thousand Trades' was more than justified. One consequence of this was the considerable economic fragmentation of the local working class. The range of occupations which Birmingham workers undertook and the variety of industrial conditions that they experienced meant that it was a rare circumstance indeed for the local working class to be united by shared grievances or mutual industrial interests. This lack of a common industrial base or unifying occupational consciousness was one factor that debilitated trades unionism in the city.

Sheffield, on the other hand,was known as 'The City of Steel'. Steel had a dominating importance in the local economy and a majority of Sheffield workers were dependent for their livelihood on the smelting and working of metal. There was a close interconnection and interdependence between the leading sectors of local industry which was brought out by their common suffering in the industrial depression of the 1920s and by the impact of the industrial disputes of the early 1920s and 1926 which affected directly up to one in three of the town's workforce. Whereas in Birmingham intra-class contacts and affiliations were reduced by the particular nature of the local

economy, in Sheffield industrial concentration and the generalised impact of contemporary economic troubles helped to foster a more united and aggrieved working-class consciousness.

To pursue this line of argument more specifically, in the small-scale trades of Birmingham localism and traditionalism acted in conjunction with a trades unionism that was weak or conciliatory or both to encourage the city's workers to look for middle-class assistance in the defence of their conditions. The early deskilling of large sections of the traditional industries' workforce and the prevalence of female employment combined to deprive these workers (under circumstances in which women were the victims, not the culprits) of levers of craft control and trade solidarity that might otherwise have induced a more resistant and antagonistic occupational ethos.

In Sheffield, a similar localism and traditionalism might be found but the context was very different. The considerable early successes in resisting attacks on craft prerogatives and a heritage of militant trades unionism ensured that the trades consciousness of the Sheffield artisans was expressed in and transmitted through independent working-class organisation. An occupational consciousness had arisen that stressed craft identity and through it - and more particularly in the 1920s through its dissolution - a sense of class.

In the large-scale trades of Birmingham, the newness of the workforces and their diverse origins and the other specialised factors hampering trades union organisation discussed earlier impeded the development and operation of an industrial consciousness capable of forming the basis of a more politicised awareness of working-class interests. Here again, the absence of craft traditions militated against any strong ideology and defence of working-class rights on the shop floor.

The workers of Sheffield's heavy trades had had time to forge traditions of unionisation which survived to influence popular consciousness

even as their material basis was being eroded by the 1920s depression. Craft and occupational loyalties were developed in an environment of large-scale manufacture and impersonal industrial relations that conduced to a sense of independent working-class interests.

There is thus a paradox that contemporary economic circumstances operating similarly in both towns (for example, the disintegration of union organisation and the erosion of craft privilege), as well as the structural features held in common such as large and small units of production) could yield very different political results. The factors of timing and tradition are vital here.

In Birmingham, the employers' moves against craft rights and trades unionism were largely pre-erptive, which is to say that they were able, before and after the War, to use the advantageous terrain offered by the diversified nature of the local economy and fragmented working class to prevent the formation of organisation and ideology that might have withstood or, at least, opposed the uncontested exercise of their industrial powers. Lacking thus any clearly defined or resilient sense of their industrial interests and lacking, certainly, the means to operationalise such understanding as did exist, the Birmingham working class was unusually open to the possibilities of alternative industrial and political strategies by which to defend its interests. That many chose a strategy of cooperative industrial relations with their employers and political class collaboration was not, of course, inevitable. It required the working of other favourable environmental factors and the intervention and agency of human actors to transform this background potential into the fecula of Unionism.

In Sheffield, the employers attacks on craft privilege and trades union organisation were essentially retaliatory. Identities and solidarities, formative and expressive of a strong sense of working-class consciousness, had already been forged. The post-war depression and employers' counter-attack were forces which, while weakening the organisational base of the

working-class movement, reinforced the analysis that underpinned it. An overall sense of working-class identity, encouraged by the particular nature of Sheffield's economic structure and strengthened by the economic conditions of the 1920s, ensured that the working-class response to contemporary problems was channelled via working-class media. Labour politics was one means by which affiliations and critiques formed in the industrial sphere were given expression when other forms of working-class resistance were being undermined; another was activity within the unemployed workers' movement.

Unemployment was a massive problem in Sheffield but was one which, as it was so widespread in its effects, could not be isolated or ignored. Nearly every family had some direct or indirect experience of unemployment so the phenomenon was not so much one which fragmented the working class as one which contributed to a shared understanding of common circumstances and concerns. Neither were the unemployed isolated at the organisational level. The Trades and Labour Council and the Unemployed Committee cooperated usefully for most of the period and political differences, though never submerged, were generally contained in the working-class movement's common struggle to defend the conditions of the unemployed. The conflicts within the unemployed movement's leadership should not be ignored but probably more significant in terms of the unemployed's perceptions and behaviour was the fact that such leadership existed. The input of former shop stewards and union activists, acting within an environment where union traditions were strong and militant, was vital in making the unemployed movement a real force to be reckoned with.

In Birmingham, for much of the time the scope and the necessity for activity amongst the unemployed simply did not exist. But even in such periods of mass unemployment as did occur the unemployed workers' movement was less firmly rooted and more fractured than that of Sheffield. The movement lacked the sustenance of a background of strong working-class

organisation and consciousness, political differences largely prevented a united response, and cooperation with the Birmingham trades union movement was strained. Acting thus, in relative isolation, it was comparatively easy for the authorities to pick off the small militant leadership of the local unemployed movement and effectively neutralise it. More generally, the overall buoyancy of the Birmingham economy meant that there was more hope for the local victims of unemployment and it was easier for them to perceive the problem as an individual misfortune rather than as a manifestation of systemic breakdown.

The experience of work and non-work was one of the most direct and consequently one of the most important influences on working-class consciousness. But economic conditions never in any simple way determined the nature of working-class politics. What they did do, however, was to provide a basic terrain in which human agency set to work. In the succeeding sections, we examine the many factors in society and politics that mediated and interpreted these primary work experiences and made actual such ideological influences as were potential in this, the primary raw material of the human social structure.

Chapter 3

CLASS AND COMMUNITY

3.1 Introduction

Labour's principal appeal, whatever its formal claims to represent all classes and despite its eschewal of the more doctrinaire forms and expressions of class-war politics, was to class - to a sense of working-class identity and an appreciation of working-class interests. Birmingham and Sheffield, though different in many ways, were both strongly working-class cities. If we may take housing rateable values as a guide, the figures for 1930 suggest that 69 per cent of households in Birmingham and 75 per cent in Sheffield could be defined as working-class.[1] A social survey of Sheffield carried out in the following year concluded that 82 per cent of households in the city were working-class as defined by income and manual occupation.[2] There was thus considerable scope for a politics of and for the working class in both cities. But class, though definable by objective socio-economic criteria, becomes meaningful and operational historically only when it is interpreted and expressed subjectively through the mores and medium of community.

This section sets out to explore the way in which class and community experiences interacted to promote particular political loyalties in the variety of working-class communities found in Birmingham and Sheffield. A typology of working-class communities is adopted which, though necessarily somewhat schematic, is nevertheless useful in describing the main forms of working-class social patterning and the political affiliations they generated.

---

1. City of Birmingham, General Statistics and Epitome of the City's Accounts, March, 1930, Table 14, Valuation List;
City of Sheffield, Valuation List for the Sheffield Rating Area, April, 193(
Working-class houses are deemed to have had a rateable value of £13 or below. See: M. Bowley, Housing and the State (1947), p. 273.
2. A.D.K. Owen, A Survey of the Standard of Living in Sheffield (Sheffield, 1933), p. 13.

3.2 The Lower Working-Class Community

The communities here described as lower working-class are taken to comprise a predominantly non-skilled working population residing in poor quality housing and possessing few formal structures of self-help and self-expression. They often, however, contained strong communal loyalties and solidarities fostered by informal means of working-class self-help and expressed in the close community relationships that were built up at the neighbourhood level and through the chief forum of local sociability, the public house.

In Birmingham, such a community was found in classic form in the city's seven central wards which were usually grouped together as the Inner Ring (see Map 1). This was the oldest developed area of Birmingham, comprising principally properties developed before the 1880s. Back-to-back housing predominated; 53 per cent of houses in the Inner Ring as a whole were of this type while in St. Paul's the proportion rose to 63 per cent.[1] The other chief characteristic of the inner city was the large number of courts - groups of, mainly, six to eight houses, built back-to-back and huddled around a small open yard, which shared toilet and washing facilities and had access to the main streets by tunnels piercing the bordering terraces. Even in 1934 almost half the houses in the central wards had no through ventilation and over two thirds shared w.c.s.[2]

Though once considered respectable housing for the city's artisans, by the interwar period the back-to-backs of the Inner Ring had deteriorated sharply. The practice of hiring front rooms and top floors as small workshops and the gradual infilling of the area's former open spaces created an insanitary and unhealthy district, densely populated and heavily industrialised.[3] At the same time, the better-paid workers, who could

---

1. T.C., 23;10;1925.
2. J.L. Rushbrooke, Birmingham's Black Spots (Birmingham, 1934), p. 6.
3. S.D. Chapman, 'The Contribution of Building Clubs and the Freehold Land Society to Working-Class Housing in Birmingham' in S.D. Chapman (ed.) The History of Working-Class Housing (Newton Abbot, 1971), pp. 224-25.

afford to do so, moved into the newly-built and better quality housing of the surrounding wards.[1] The residue of low-waged workers which remained was yet more isolated by the massive development of Corporation housing in the 1920s because the higher costs of the new estates placed them beyond their reach. They were dependent still on the low rental, private sector; ninety-nine out of every hundred homes in the Inner Ring were rented from private landlords.[2]

Occupationally, the bulk of the area's wage-earners worked in the depressed small-scale trades which were based in the Inner Ring. The concentration of jewellery workers in St. Paul's has already been remarked upon; even in 1939, after a period of considerable decline in the industry, there were 411 jewellery firms and 371 ancillary metal firms located in the ward of which 80 per cent employed less than 20 workers.[3] There was a smaller convergence of the hand-made gun trade in St. Mary's while the other wards contained most of Birmingham's brassware and small metalware manufacturers. The sheer number of small works involved may be gauged by the fact that Deritend Division alone contained over 700 factories and Duddeston a further 900.[4]

The area was the poorest and most deprived of Birmingham but it supported Unionism to an extent that surprised even its strongest adherents. The Unionists of Deritend were honest when they admitted as much.[5]

> Frankly, we could understand many more of our electors voting Socialist or Bolshevist or anything that held out the slightest hope of better conditions than those in which they live.

Writing of West Birmingham, even Austen Chamberlain could not comprehend 'why anyone who lives in such slums should not be a Socialist, Communist or Red Revolutionary'.[6] They were not however. The Inner Ring as a whole

---

1. A. Sutcliffe, 'A Century of Flats in Birmingham, 1875-1973' in A. Sutcliffe (ed.), Multi-Storey Living (1974), p. 182.
2. Bournville Village Trust, When We Build Again (1941), p. 54.
3. Board of Trade Working Party, Jewellery and Silverware (1946), p. 104.
4. BUA minutes, 12;3;1926; 8;1;1926.
5. ibid., 12;3;1926.
6. Austen Chamberlain Papers, AC5/1/250; Austen to Ida Chamberlain, 18;11;1922.

recorded just 32 Labour victories in a total of 91 annual municipal election contests, the Unionists won half, Liberals and Independents the rest.

An almost exactly analogous situation prevailed in the central wards of Sheffield, taken here to comprise St. Philip's, St. Peter's, Moor, Sharrow and the innermost, more densely populated portion of Park. This area, which contained almost two thirds of Sheffield's 16,000 back-to-backs, was by all measurements the most thickly settled and unhealthy in the city.[1] The 1931 social survey also shows its workforce to have been the lowest paid and it recorded not one single instance of working-class owner occupation.[2] The central wards also contained the majority of the light trades' works and factories, and a 1924 survey revealed that industry took up over 17.5 per cent of the central district's land space and in large parts of St. Philip's, St. Peter's, Moor and Park wards it formed over 50 per cent of the occupied area.[3]

But a majority of the light trades' artisans (as distinguished by their skills and relatively high earnings) appear to have lived in the more salubrious working-class suburbs, notably Walkley and Crookesmoor.[4] Most of the local working class were unskilled, many in the 1920s were unemployed. A report on six courts 'represented' for slum clearance in 1925 showed 39 per cent of the male wage-earners to be without work, 16 per cent were classified as labourers, 11 per cent worked in the light trades and mining respectively, and just 7 per cent were employed in the heavy industries.[5]

Politically, the area was more mixed. Sharrow and St. Peter's were anti-Labour strongholds but St. Philip's, Park and Moor were more evenly balanced with a tendency for Labour support to harden in the later 1920s

---

1. J.N. Reedman, A Report on a Survey of Licensing in Sheffield (Sheffield, 1931), p. 37.
2. A.D.K. Owen, op. cit., p. 31, p. 35.
3. P. Abercrombie, Sheffield. A Civic Survey (1924).
4. H. Mathers, 'Sheffield Municipal Politics, 1893-1926. Parties, Personalities and the Rise of labour', Ph. D. thesis, University of Sheffield, 1979, p. 57.
4. Sheffield Social Survey Committee, miscellaneous materials, MD1227-R 1(B); Medical Officers' Department report on Bailey Street scheme.

until disillusion with the second Labour Government set in. Although almost 90 per cent of the households in the central district were working-class, clearly this was not translated in any unproblematic fashion into support for the party which claimed to be the chief representative of the working class.[1] It is to an explanation of these areas' political affiliations that we turn to next.

(i) Lower Working-Class Conservatism

Though the Unionists of Birmingham expressed surprise at the non-radicalism of the city's slum population, considerable evidence supports the view that it was precisely the poorest strata of the working class who were the most conservative. To some extent, this was a question of mere survival; the day-to-day struggle to make ends meet left little time to spend on ideas of self-improvement or social change. It was believed, in any case, that such ideas led only to an unproductive discontent with one's lot for there was little that could be done to alter prevailing conditions. The world was too large, too complex and too impersonal in its operations to be comprehended, let alone changed; it was better that the individual should make the most of the situation as he found it and take such satisfactions as life allowed.[2]

These satisfactions were generally short-term - a good night-out, a brief visit by some local worthy - and sometimes even vicarious - a royal baby, the employer's son's wedding, for example; but they were compensations sufficient and comprehensible within the terms of a working-class life 'whose main stress [was] on the intimate, the sensory, the detailed and the personal'.[3] In this way, the poverty of the slum working class, their economic vicissitudes, their lack of education, limited horizons and low aspirations all merged into an indivisible continuum of ideology and

---

1. Owen, op. cit., p. 13.
2. R. Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy (Harmondsworth, 1981), ch. 3, M. Kerr, The People of Ship Street (1958), ch. 10.
3. Hoggart, op. cit., pp. 104-05.

experience in which an ethos of working-class life emerged that not merely reflected the conditions of working-class life but subtly reinforced them too.[1] Thus it was, as noted by Robert Roberts of the mass of unskilled workers, that 'the less they had to conserve the more conservative in spirit they showed themselves'.[2]

In this context, the respectable and aspirant working-class candidates of the Labour Party were as much outsiders as the predominantly higher-class Conservatives. Indeed, to many they were rather more unwelcome for while the Conservatives offered a rather patronising but in some ways empathetic endorsement of the lower working-class life-style, Labour held out the promise (or threat) of radical change. Norman Tiptaft, a radical politician and would-be author of Birmingham, observed the phenomenon well though sourly. Your average slum dweller, he wrote:[3]

> is living below a decent human standard, and he believes that the Almighty put him there. He doesn't want to get out. All he wants is food, drink and amusement. What is the use of talking about the "New Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land" to people like that? Amuse the men and promise the women a ride in the car. That, in the twentieth century, is the way to get votes in many parts of highly civilised England.

Elections were not, for the most part, fought on detailed policy issues. Rather, for the Conservatives, they represented an opportunity to reaffirm and reinforce the unspoken social contract that sanctified the inegalitarian class system. A tour of the courts, some discreet treating, a ride to the polls - by these means, the Conservatives were partly able to fulfil the unonerous duties that the contract placed on them when, for once, the working-class were in a position of power through their possession of the ballot.

But the give and take of election time could succeed only through the operation of more long-term factors. A further important component of

---

1. G. Knupfer, 'Portrait of the Underdog' in R. Bendix, S.M. Lipset (eds), Class, Status and Power (1967).
2. R. Roberts, The Classic Slum (Harmondsworth, 1980), p. 167.
3. N. Tiptaft, The City Father (1925), p. 78.

working-class conservatism, the lubricating oil of the social contract, was deference - a respect accorded to the upper classes because of their high social status and the special abilities and talents that this status was held to entail. In Birmingham, the local council was of unusually select composition; many of the leading figures in the social and commercial life of the town were councillors and aldermen.[1] Over the years, the local plutocracy had acquired almost patrician status - a transformation personified above all in the Chamberlain dynasty. In Sheffield, where the town's industrialists rarely had pretensions to be anything more than spokesmen for industrial interests even when acting as public representatives, this phenomenon was not so marked. To some extent, genuine aristocrats still had influence; James Fitzalan Hope, the grandson of the fourteenth Duke of Norfolk (the largest local landowner) represented Central Division from 1908 to 1929.

There were some in the working class who voted Conservative through the simple respect they held for their social superiors and the pleasure they derived from identifying with a life-style and an eminence to which they could not aspire. But motives were rarely pure. One of the most valued attributes of the upper classes was their wealth; the deference accorded to them also had to be earned. In Birmingham in particular, the Unionists worked assiduously to make secure their role at the top of the social hierarchy. Annie Chamberlain (the wife of Neville) kept notebooks containing the names of some 600 Ladywood constituents with details of their family circumstances, number of children, illnesses and housing conditions. The entries also recorded small gifts left by Mrs. Chamberlain, usually flowers and plants, sometimes food and money.[2] This was unusually thorough but is illustrative of the attention that the local Unionists believed it necessary to devote to their constituencies. Smedley Crooke, the Unionist

1. D.S. Morris, K. Newton, 'Profile of a Local Political Elite: Businessmen on Birmingham City Council, 1920-1966', University of Birmingham Faculty of Commercial and Social Science, Discussion Papers Series F, 6, (May, 1969).
2. Neville Chamberlain Papers, NC5/11/1-2; two volumes of Mrs. Neville Chamberlain's notebooks re visits to constituents, 1919-1922.

M.P. for Deritend, set aside half his parliamentary salary for the relief of distress in the Division. A committee 'of all classes without regard to politics' was established to provide succour to deserving cases but it is unlikely that the Unionists were so disinterested as to fail completely to make political capital out of this arrangement, particularly as the treasurer and chairman of the committee were Unionist councillors.[1] Nevertheless, there was clearly an ethic of noblesse oblige that still influenced many on both sides of the social divide.

Cross-class links were also strengthened by the essential traditionalism of both Conservative and slum working-class cultures; both looked to the past and believed the established order to be legitimated by that past. Specific Conservative policies were designed to appeal to and strengthen this ethos. The working-class Unionist municipal candidate in Duddeston in 1930 issued a leaflet nicely calculated to appeal to local immobilism, self-respect and distrust of change:[2]

> Housing. The Socialist policy is Slum Clearance. (They refer to your house as a slum.) This means House Hunting and removal. Frank Lannon's policy is repairs. This means every house in Duddeston is made fit to live in.

Nowhere was the clash of working-class cultures better illustrated than in the sphere of education. To the respectable working class that supported the Labour Party, education was one of the principal means to individual progress and social reform. To the slum working class, education was irrelevant to their way of life and, at worse, disruptive of it. The issue of the school leaving age encapsulated the contrast. Labour wished to raise the leaving age to 15 with grants provided to parents who could not afford the loss of earnings involved; the Conservatives opposed all forms of compulsion. When a Labour Government took office pledged to take action, the Unionists successfully made it one of the chief issues of the local elections of 1929.[3] In the following year, Frank Lannon again issued a

---

1. Straight Forward, March, 1923.
2. Birmingham Municipal Election Literature, BCL; Duddeston, 1930.
3. BBLP minutes, 14;11;1929.

leaflet designed to appeal to and cultivate local prejudices, this time those against both education itself and the interfering bureaucrats who were a particular bête noir of the traditional working class:[1]

> Do you know that the present Socialist Government intend raising the school leaving age to 15? Did you ask them? Of course you did not!! You only get 5/- if you're lucky and that after they pry into your means. Protest against this Tyranny.

Patriotism was another unifying motif in both working-class and Conservative value-systems. Being British and taking pride in British achievements were compensating satisfactions that the lower working class was allowed, and national celebrations frequently provided the pretext for a good 'knees-up'. Against the easily understood and concrete appeal of patriotism, Labour's internationalism appeared nebulous and idealistic, and the Party was often accused by its opponents of betraying British interests through its international links and sympathies. Tariff reform, which could merge material self-interest, national sentiment and straightforward xenophobia, was another popular issue in Conservative campaigning.

The ideology that united all these different components of working-class conservatism in Birmingham was the Chamberlain Tradition. To some extent, it survived merely as a tradition, as an emotional link with an individual and a past that was treasured even as the conditions of its formation were disappearing and its chief protagonist long dead. As late as 1935, Austen Chamberlain could write:[2]

> It is wonderful how father's memory is still cherished - I saw your dad, I carried a torch in the procession. We've always voted Chamberlain. My dad thought everything of Joe and so on and so on in every variety of expression.

Certainly, it was a local sentiment that the Unionists, and particularly Joseph's sons, were eager to exploit. In 1922, Austen considered his most effective piece of electioneering to be a leaflet with pictures of his father

---

1. T.C., 7;11;1930.
2. Austen Chamberlain Papers, AC5/1/714; Austen to Hilda Chamberlain, 17;11;1935.

and himself under the heading 'You voted for Joe, now vote for Austen'.[1] To Unionism's opponents in Birmingham, the respect and awe in which Chamberlain was held became almost idolatrous. Tiptaft's none too subtly disguised parody of local politics is, presumably, exaggerated but it gives a vivid portrayal of the frustration experienced by Birmingham's non-Unionist politicians:[2]

> No Conservative politician need be at a loss at a Brassville public meeting to evoke cheers from his audience. He may not have a scintilla of wit, his ideas may be of the foggiest, his brain power below average, his oratory a minus quantity, his knowledge of politics nil - all he has to do at the end of his most wearisome period is to pause, strike an impressive attitude and then remind his audience - not of the future, not even of the present but of what "Your most distinguished citizen, now, alas, no longer with us, the Right Honourable Benjamin Rademan, said in 1871-"
> What it was the Right Honourable Benjamin Rademan said in 1871 no one ever hears, owing to prolonged outbursts of applause.

But the devotion to Chamberlain was not mere irrationalism; Chamberlain's message and appeal and his personal style were uniquely qualified to speak to every aspect of working-class conservatism. Reform, patriotism, local pride, working-class self respect and deference to wealth and ability were all addressed and catered for in the very special hybrid that was Chamberlainism. The Chamberlain Tradition survived into the interwar period not merely as something vestigial but because it was responding to continuingly felt needs in an environment still, in parts, conducive to its mode of formation and operation. More directly, Unionist politics in Birmingham prospered because its advocates continued to implement some of the more radical promises of Chamberlain's social programme. This point will be examined in more detail later; it is necessary now to explore some of the ways in which the Unionist domination of the central wards was being undermined.

---

1. Austen Chamberlain Papers, AC5/1/250; Austen to Ida Chamberlain, 18;11;1922.
2. Tiptaft, op. cit., p. 11.

(ii) The Growth of Labour Support amongst the Lower Working Class

In the 1920s, the political complexion of the lower working-class community was undergoing important changes. Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland noted with concern developments in Nechells:[1]

> In the old days, the slum parts when they voted at all (which was the problem) always voted Conservative. They now have a tendency to grow Labour which they never had before.

By the end of the decade, Labour allegiances had developed in the poorer wards of both Birmingham and Sheffield which were firmly rooted though the upheavals of 1931 provided a temporary set-back. In this section, we attempt to account for this transformation.

It is the active commitment and personal dedication of many Labour Party members to the interests and concerns of the poorer working class that takes a large share of the responsibility for Labour's improved performance. Gradually, local councillors and representatives were able to establish personal contacts and a recognised presence in the slum communities which won them the trust and gratitude of the local inhabitants. This was achieved not by socialist rhetoric and promises of the New Jerusalem but by a record of solid, unspectacular work and piecemeal gains won over a number of years. Through personal influence and practical help, Labour activists were able to overcome many of the local prejudices against interfering and impractical outsiders that had previously operated to Labour's detriment.

The case of George Sawyer of Duddeston is a good example. He represented the area as a Guardian from 1915, as a city councillor from 1921, and, finally, as an M.P. from 1929. In all of this time, the Duddeston Divisional Labour Party was amongst the weakest and most poverty-stricken in Birmingham - but what 'our George' lacked in organisation, he made up for in personality.[2] Sawyer's politics did not extend much further than a devout belief in the taxation of land values but he worked steadily and sturdily to defend the interests of his constituents. In this defence, socialism and

---

1. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/118/3; Steel-Maitland to Owen, ?;11;1924.
2. T.C., 31;5;1929; B.M., 10;10;1931.

sometimes official Labour Party policy (not necessarily the same thing) played little part. In 1929, he publicly repudiated Labour's policy on the raising of the school leaving age, going so far as to interrupt and contradict other Labour speakers on the matter. Though brought before both the Divisional Labour Party Management Committee and the Borough Labour Party to account for his behaviour, George felt he was on strong ground:[1]

> he was going to please himself; the seat was his with the biggest majority in Birmingham: if the maintenance allowances were not adequate in his opinion he would vote against it; he had won Duddeston by his own effort and had carried the other two councillors in his work; if the Labour Party decided to cut their throats like they did in 1924 over the Capital Levy, he, George Sawyer, was not going to cut his throat; it was his seat, he knew how to keep it and he was going to keep it.

In the event, Sawyer was swept away like so many others in the Coalition landslide of 1931 but he remained a Labour councillor until 1940 at which point he resigned the whip to sit as an independent. He lost his seat in 1945.

Percy Shurmer was another Labour councillor (the representative of St. Martin's ward from 1921) who established a personal reputation and following. Unlike Sawyer, Shurmer was known as a left-winger in the local Party but his platform was similarly down-to-earth. An election leaflet which he issued in 1924 captures well the appeal he made to his working-class constituents:[2]

> Stand by the man who has stood by you
> Who Prevented many Evictions!
> Has made Landlords Repair Property!
> Fought Pensions Case!
> Had Your Yard Lamp Lit...
> Vote for Shurmer
> His Next Work: Gas and Taps in All Houses.

Shurmer also worked hard to brighten the lives of the poor children of the ward for whom he organised an annual Christmas party. In 1927, he was able to arrange for 1400 of 'Shurmer's sparrows' (as the children became known) to enjoy tea and entertainment in the Town Hall, having earlier raised much of the money himself by parading the local streets with a barrel organ.[3]

---

1. BBLP minutes; Sawyer subcommittee, 17;1;1930.
2. Birmingham Municipal Election Literature, BCL; St.Martin's, 1924.
3. T.C., 28;1;1927.

Such devotion earned some reward when Shurmer was elected M.P. for Sparkbrook in 1945.

Shurmer's counterpart in the other ward of Deritend Division was Alice Longden, the wife of the constituency's Labour candidate, Fred Longden. Longden's victory in 1929 owed much to the hard work and practical Labour propaganda put in by these two committed Labour councillors.

The Unionists recognised that they were faced with a problem:[1]

> we have got to find means in the weaker Divisions of establishing personal contact and more intimate touch with the electors. The Labour Party's success in one or two Divisions is due in no small measure to the fact that their Councillors pay constant visits to the courts and streets.

But, in this respect, Labour held an advantage that money and social status could not overcome and even reinforced because working-class Labour representatives, who understood their locale, were able to become part of the local community in a way that Unionists rarely could. The social and political eminence of many of the city's Unionist M.P.s and councillors, which fostered deference at one level, operated at another to hamper the development of a 'good secondary line of local leaders', capable of speaking for, rather than to, the working-class community.[2]

Labour even developed the ability to beat Unionism at its own game. In 1924, it was noted with concern that:[3]

> Unionist organisation [was] severely hampered in some Divisions by the local Socialist Councillors and their friends taking a very prominent part in the distribution of city charity and relief funds.

The Unionists hoped to counteract such activity by stepping up their own efforts in the same field but such plans were to little avail because the two main means previously employed by the lower working class to alleviate the effects of their poverty - neighbourly self-help and private charity - were being supplemented and increasingly superseded by a third - the public provision of assistance at the national and local level. In this area, the

---

1. BUA minutes, 14;6;1929.
2. The Times, 7;9;1926.
3. Neville Chamberlain Papers, NC5/10/23; P.J. Hannon to Neville Chamberlain, 1;11;1924.

activists of the Labour movement were peculiarly well placed to act as the sympathetic interpreters and intermediaries of state intervention. By their work on the Boards of Guardians and such local bodies as the Welfare and Juvenile Employment Committees, socialists were not only able to facilitate the smooth functioning of a system in which they believed but could also cash in electorally on the role such work gave them in the local community.[1] In Sheffield, where the Labour Party won control of the apparatus of local government in 1926, this was doubly the case.

In Birmingham, another quite contrasting phenomenon was also weaning working-class support from Chamberlainism. In the 1920s, the local Labour movement found figures with the personality and self-confidence to challenge the Chamberlain Tradition head-on. One such was Dr. Robert Dunstan, whose bravura and rhetoric, old-fashioned in retrospect, succeeded in reducing Neville Chamberlain's majority in Ladywood to 1554 in 1923. Another was Oswald Mosley who became the Labour candidate in Ladywood when Dunstan joined the Communist Party in 1924.

Mosley was a figure who might have been hand-picked to appeal to the poor working class of the Division. An aristocrat himself and the son-in-law of one of England's premier earls (and Conservative politicians), Lord Curzon, darkly handsome, charming and wealthy, he possessed a style and a charisma that he used ably in the service of his considerable political ambition. As an orator, he was rated second to none and even today many in Birmingham retain memories of his rhetoric and display:[2]

> A marvellous speaker, marvellous! He wouldn't stand up to speak, he'd got to stand on a table or a chair,he could never get high enough to speak.

---

1. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/117/4; Steel-Maitland to Dr. Featherstone, 26;1;1926.
2. Saltley Local History Project, Scrubbing What Wasn't Dirty (Birmingham, 1983), p. 92.

The inevitable comparisons with an earlier hero of the Birmingham working class were made. After an eighty minute speech at the Town Hall:[1]

> old men went up to him saying, "Back to Joey, back to the great tradition!" One old man said "I have heard Bright, Joseph Chamberlain, Lloyd George and all the giants of the past at the summit of their powers, but never anything like this meeting. The only thing comparable with this was Joe at the very height and vigour of his manhood.

Joe's sons, particularly Neville, appeared pallid and insubstantial figures in contrast, and the Unionists themselves were forced to admit 'the extraordinary abilitities of Mr. Mosley as a showman' after Chamberlain had scraped home by just 77 votes in the parliamentary election of 1924.[2] The industrial troubles of 1926 provided Mosley with another platform which he eagerly exploited and, after his 'intense activities' during the General Strike, the Unionists were in 'no doubt that Mr. Mosley was getting hold of some of our people and had a tremendous following in the Ladywood Division'.[3] When Neville Chamberlain conceded defeat in July that year by the announcement of his move to the safe seat of Edgbaston, the Birmingham Labour movement, with Mosley in the forefront, felt able to confidently proclaim the end of the Chamberlain Tradition.[4]

Mosley also worked quietly but effectively at a more intimate level to secure political support in the ways normally favoured by the wealthy politicians of the Right. He promised to buy the Ladywood Ex-Servicemen's Guild a meeting-place, he invested in a supply of Dispensary Notes to give to those who needed hospital treatment, and in 1926 he spent over £26 on flowers to be sent in his name to deserving cases in the constituency.[5]

According to his biographer, Robert Skidelsky, 'Mosley was the key figure in Labour's advance in Birmingham'.[6] While we may wish to redress

---

1. A.K. Chesterton, Oswald Mosley. Portrait of a Leader (N.D.), pp. 54-55.
2. BUA minutes, 26;11;1924.
3. ibid., 18;5;1926; 11;6;1926.
4. T.C., 20;8;1926.
5. Wilfrid Whiteley Papers, UL6/2; Ladywood Division Buildings Subcommittee minutes, 26;5;1925; UL6/3, G. Sutton to Wilfrid Whiteley, 28;6;1926; UL6/4, Mosley/Whiteley accounts, 1926.
6. R. Skidelsky, Oswald Mosley (1975), p. 171.

the balance somewhat by a due recognition of the work of the unsung heroes of the local movement, there is no doubt that Mosley's self-belief and personality played a crucial role in debunking the myth of Chamberlainism and raising Labour's status as a credible contender for political power. The Chamberlains were reduced to human proportions and their Birmingham citadel no longer appeared impregnable.

Mosley was, of course, unique. In Sheffield, where working-class Conservatism was weaker, there was less need of an opponent of his stature. Though Conservatism held sway initially in all the central wards, it had far less mystique and the only figure remotely comparable to Joseph Chamberlain was Sir Howard Vincent, the populist Conservative Fair Trader who represented Central until his death in 1908. To some extent, his influence lingered on - as late as 1927 his widow was asked to become the president of the Divisional Women's Association - but, in general, the Conservatives in Sheffield possessed neither the will nor the capacity of their counterparts in Birmingham to strengthen those currents in the life-style and mores of the lower working-class community which promoted Tory sympathies.[1]

The politics of the lower working class were in a state of flux. Old loyalties were being attacked both by attrition and frontal assault, by means responsive to local customs and by means that challenged tradition in the name of change, actual and envisaged. The armies of Labour were advancing, at different paces, with different tactics and with varying success, on all fronts and, indeed, it was the very catholicity of its approach and the nuances and contrasts of its appeal that won the Party the position of strength that it occupied in the lower working-class community in 1929. That its position, especially in Birmingham where opposing forces were still strong, was as yet not so firmly established as it would have hoped was shown by Labour's rapid fall from grace in 1930 and 1931.

. Central Division Women's Conservative Association EC minutes, 23;11;1927.

social infrastructure established by the community itself.[1]

If the foregoing description is primarily a sociological ideal-type, there were nevertheless areas in both Birmingham and Sheffield to which the thrust of its analysis may be usefully applied. Taking the case of Birmingham first, this is most obviously true of the area known collectively as East Birmingham, comprising the wards of Washwood Heath, Saltley and Small Heath. Industrially, the area contained the most important concentration of large-scale manufacture in Birmingham - the two railway carriage works, the factories of Rover and Wolseley, and the BSA works were located in its midst, and the local railway depots and gas works were further large employers. As a result, it was a more skilled, better organised and more highly paid working class that lived locally, enjoying markedly superior housing conditions. The tunnel-backed, terraced housing which predominated in the area was monotonous but each house possessed its own water supply, w.c. and yard and the housing density was less than half that which prevailed in the Inner Ring. Nearly all the houses were rented, the large majority from private landlords.[2]

The strong Labour affiliations of the area are amply illustrated by the fact that in Washwood Heath and Saltley, Labour won 20 of the 26 annual municipal contests between 1919 and 1931. The only Unionist victories occurred in 1931. Small Heath, a more mixed area socially, was also more mixed politically and here Labour won just five municipal elections.

The East End of Sheffield (comprising here Attercliffe, Burngreave, Brightside, Tinsley and Darnall) was the base of the massive expansion of Sheffield's heavy industries that had taken place from the 1860s onwards. By the 1920s, the major steel and engineering concerns of the city had grown to take up almost the entire area of the Don Valley which passed through the

---

1. D. Lockwood, 'Sources of Variation in Working-Class Images of Society', Sociological Review, 14, 3, (November, 1966), pp. 250-51.
2. Bournville Village Trust, op. cit., p. 52, p. 54.

district.[1] The concomitant to this huge industrial concentration was a degree of atmospheric pollution that today is difficult to credit. Prevailing air currents channelled the smoke and smut belched out by the local works up the Don Valley and through the most densely settled areas of working-class habitation. It was reckoned that around 15.7 tonnes of soot and dust rained down upon Attercliffe each month and it was found in 1918 that the ward enjoyed one third less sunshine than did a comparable area to the west of the city centre.[2]

The local population had at least the consolation of living relatively near to their place of work for the large majority of the area's wage-earners were employed in the heavy industries. They were also, when in work, fairly highly paid but the heavy toll taken by unemployment in Sheffield's staple industries was shown by the 1931 social survey which discovered 20 per cent of the local population to be living below the poverty line. In two thirds of cases, lack of work was the principal cause of poverty.[3]

It was overall a solidly working-class area; in Attercliffe, Burngreave and Brightside, around 95 per cent of the households were working-class - a proportion which made it as near a single-class community as is reasonable to expect in a town of Sheffield's size.[4] The local workers earned their living in large-scale, heavy industry, they belonged or had belonged to trades unions, and they owned no property to speak of save the labour of their hands (less than two per cent of the houses were owner-occupied).[5] It was a working-class community to gladden the heart of Karl Marx and politically it fulfilled his hopes, at least partially, by an almost unwavering support for the Labour Party. In 55 municipal contests, the anti-Labour coalition triumphed just seven times and the area returned Labour M.P.s from 1922 onwards.

---

1. Abercrombie, op. cit., p. 5.
2. Sheffield Year Book, 1921, p. 87.
3. Owen, op. cit., p. 25, p. 28.
4. ibid., p. 13.
5. ibid., p. 31.

In seeking to account for the proletarian community's Labour sympathies, to some extent mere description is sufficient. In terms of both their occupational experience and their social environment, the working-classes of East Birmingham and the East End lacked the opportunities to make inter-class contacts and establish cross-class loyalties that existed in different ways in both the slum and artisanal communities. Their de facto social segregation promoted an ideological self-sufficiency, fostered by the homogeneity of local conditions and life-style, in which class identity and commonalty were the central motifs. By the 1920s, Labour politics had become just one part of the community's self-identity.

The barriers to cross-class politics were not, of course, total but they were seldom breached by middle-class incomers bringing with them a middle-class world-view. The East End's two Labour M.P.s were an apparently unlikely duo to represent an industrial working-class area - Arthur Ponsonby was a former pageboy at the court of Queen Victoria, a member of the nobility, and a former diplomat; Cecil Wilson, a Congregationalist industrialist and temperance advocate - but they were accepted and, particularly in the case of Wilson, held in affection to the extent to which they had come to identify themselves with local working-class interests.[1] R.H. Minshall, a retired civil servant who represented the citizens of Darnall on the City Council from 1925, was another unlikely figure who was able to overcome class prejudice by his unquestioned commitment to the area's needs.[2] Conversely, the two Citizens' Alliance councillors elected for Brightside were both workingmen. Clearly, in these instances class membership was a significant factor determining political support which overrode political considerations. In general, though, working-class Conservatives kept a low profile in an

---

1. For Ponsonby, see: S.V. Bracher, The Herald Book of Labour Members (1923), p. 140.
   For Wilson, see: J.M. Bellamy, J. Saville (eds), Dictionary of Labour Biography, vol. 6 (1982), pp. 272-74.
2. Edward Carpenter Memorial Service, 1948. Record of Speeches in the 1947 Service (Sheffield, 1948), p. 1.

environment where community mores and local voting patterns marked out their eccentricity. Attempts to establish a 'Labour Unionist' association in Brightside were fruitless:[1]

> The Labour Group fight shy of openly proclaiming themselves in shop or factory, though knowing full well that there is plenty of room for their interference among their fellow workers who are being roped in by Socialists and Communists.

In Attercliffe, Conservative organisation was almost non-existent.[2]

But there were also other, more positive, forces which inculcated and consolidated the proletarian community's political affiliations. One such was the workingmen's club which played an important role in the social life of the working class. Almost one third of Sheffield's total of registered clubs were found in the Attercliffe, Brightside, Darnall and Tinsley registration subdistricts, and the wider role that such clubs could perform in the community was well illustrated by the work of the AEU Institute in Burngreave.[3] As well as being a meeting place for Sheffield's engineers, the Institute, which claimed a membership of 4000 by 1929, also acted as the local headquarters of the Union and the Unemployed Workers' Movement.[4] It also ran its own dramatic club for the purposes of cultural education and propaganda.[5] In this way, the Institute was able to combine social, industrial, political and educational functions under the one roof and it became an important ideological and organisational base of the independent working-class movement in Sheffield.

In Birmingham as a whole, the workingmen's club movement was less developed and it is therefore of particular significance that a concentration of clubs should occur in East Birmingham. Furthermore, two of the clubs, the East Birmingham Trades and Labour Club (Saltley) and the Bordesley Labour Club (Small Heath), were affiliated to the Borough Labour Party and were the only clubs so affiliated in Birmingham. The East Birmingham

---

1. Brightside Conservative Association minutes, 15;7;1923.
2. The Times, 15;12;1923.
3. Reedman, op. cit., p. 37.
4. S.D.I., 4;3;1929.
5. The Worker, January, 1920.

Trades and Labour Club, which had a membership approaching 500 in 1930, was 'run entirely in the interests of the Labour movement' and permitted membership only to those who belonged to the Labour Party, the ILP or a trade union.[1] The Bordesley Club also enrolled only members of the working-class movement and even, in 1930, boasted its own branch of the ILP.[2] In addition, it ran WEA classes, a choir, fishing, cricket and football sections, and sick and benevolent societies.[3] For those who wished it, the Club clearly provided a 'total' environment, capable of meeting all the needs of the socially active and class conscious worker.

Another area where working-class interests might be assimilated into Labour sympathies was the Tenants' Association movement. In practice, in Birmingham generally this was far from being the case. Though the Birmingham and District Tenants' Federation was founded with the active assistance of the Trades Council, it always emphasised its supposedly non-political nature and, indeed, the Federation's first president was a working-class Conservative who was later to become a Unionist councillor in South Erdington and its chief legal adviser stood as a Liberal parliamentary candidate in Sparkbrook in 1922 and 1929. Some of the local associations were more partisan though, and both the East Birmingham Tenants' Association and the Small Heath Tenants' Association affiliated to the Borough Labour Party during the 1920s.[4] They were, however, the only ones to do so in Birmingham for the politics of the Birmingham working class as a whole were too contested and too ambiguous to allow of such action except in East Birmingham where Labour was already widely accepted as the natural political vehicle for working-class interests. The consanguinity of the various working-class bodies of East Birmingham is well illustrated by the fact that the offices of the East Birmingham Tenants' Association were located in the

---

1. Report of the Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies; Part 3, Industrial and Provident Societies, 1930; T.C., 14;3;1924
2. ILP Annual Conference Report, 1930, p. 120; T.C., 13;11;1925.
3. T.C., 15;7;1927.
4. BBLP minutes, 8;10;1920; T.C., 25;1;1924.

Trades and Labour Club.[1]

In this regard, the Birmingham Labour movement appears to stand in advance of that of Sheffield because the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council only permitted the affiliation of organisations with directly political or industrial interests. There were initially close relations between the Sheffield Tenants' Defence Association and the Trades and Labour Council but the former body seems to have become defunct by 1923.[2] This may indicate, however, that activity, which in Birmingham was channelled through non-political or politically contested organisations such as the tenants' associations, was in Sheffield, organised in and through the political organs of the Labour and unemployed movements - a sign of the strength and solidarism of the local working-class movement rather than its weakness.

---

1. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/117 4; Miss Logan to R.S. Hewins, 15;2;1926.
2. SFTLC minutes, 4;9;1923.

3.4 The Artisanal Working-Class Community

The artisanal working-class areas of Birmingham and Sheffield had none of the clearly distinguishable characteristics that defined the other types of working-class community. What united them to some extent was simply a state of mind, a shared ethos of self-help and respectability which expressed pride in working-class affiliations and attributes while being careful to delimit this class consciousness within carefully prescribed boundaries. The artisanal areas were composed of the upper strata of the working class; their predominantly male workforce was skilled and relatively highly paid and tended still to work in small-scale manufacture rather than in the large, increasingly deskilled, factories. Trades unionism was one badge of their respectability, others might be attendance at the local church or chapel, membership of various welfare and provident societies, a degree of education, and a continued ethic of self-improvement. Their politics, now usually Labour though sometimes still Liberal, were in whichever case normally of studious moderation. This caricature comes close enough to the reality in King's Norton and Hillsborough to be profitably used.

King's Norton was an area of industry and housing first developed in the 19th. century. It had expanded considerably since then, and was to grow massively in the interwar period through the development of several large Corporation estates, but King's Norton had always maintained a slightly aloof relationship with the rest of Birmingham. The restrictive covenants of Edgbaston and the middle-class exclusivity of Moseley formed a kind of cordon sanitaire between the area and the political and social influences of the wider city and, indeed, administratively, the district did not become a part of the city of Birmingham until 1911. It was further marked out by its high quality, low density housing and the lack of heavy industry or thickly clustered small works. These conditions made King's Norton amongst

the most healthy and salubrious in Birmingham.

The two major works were the Austins factory at Longbridge (Northfield) and Cadburys. Most Austins' workers commuted a considerable distance to their work and a more important local influence was the Bournville Works which employed a large number of wage-earners resident in Selly Oak in particular.[1] The Bournville Estate (containing 1618 houses in 1931) was not allocated exclusively to Cadburys' employees but it was estimated that approximately 40 per cent of its population worked for the company.[2] The other major employers in the Division were predominantly medium-sized metal-working and engineering firms.

Politically, the area was mixed. The Division was the first to return a Labour M.P. in Birmingham (in 1924) but was the only seat to be lost by Labour in England and Wales in 1929. At ward level, Selly Oak was a Labour stronghold but in the more middle-class wards of King's Norton and Northfield, Labour came a poor third behind the Unionists and the Liberals who polled better in this area than in any other in Birmingham.

In the Hillsborough Division and the Crookesmoor ward of Sheffield, a majority of the local wage-earners were skilled tradesmen in the cutlery and small tool industries. Though in the hostile conditions of the 1920s, the light trades' workers' traditions of craft and union were increasingly under attack, these workers were in many cases able to maintain their status, partly by successful resistance to deskilling innovation and partly, where this failed, through the continued support of the community structures of self-help. Certainly, the evidence is that even at the height of the Great Depression the area as a whole boasted a level of wages and living standards only surpassed by the smaller numbers of the affluent working class who lived in the predominantly middle-class wards to the west of the city centre.[3]

---

1. M.J. Wise (ed.), Birmingham and Its Regional Setting (Birmingham, 1950), p. 329.
2. Bournville Village Trust, The Bournville Village Trust, 1900-1951 (Birmingham, 1951), p. 40.
3. Owen, op. cit., p. 9, p. 25.

Other indicators, such as the generally good environmental and health statistics and the better quality and low density housing of these wards also suggest that they supported a relatively affluent and high status working class.[1]

As to the politics of the area, Neepsend was a Labour stronghold for reasons which will be examined more closely in a later section while Crookesmoor and Walkley were more evenly balanced. Hillsborough ward was predominantly the territory of the Citizens' Alliance.

There were a number of contradictory impulses within the artisanal community which, on balance by the 1920s, were making for Labour sympathies. The process by which political loyalties were formed was a contested and by no means uniform one, however, though in Selly Oak at least most stimuli were towards Labour voting. The personal influence of George Cadbury Jr. and the industrial and political impact of the Bournville works were the bane of the local Unionists. The Bournville Estate too was almost solidly Labour, exhibiting the same interlinked processes of positive discrimination and self-selection that made the Works itself a bastion of Labour support.[2] The Estate attracted those with an ideological sympathy for the type of experiment in social engineering that it represented, while the Village Trust selected as residents those who displayed this kind of commitment. The Works and the Estate were bases of Labour affiliation which spread their influence throughout Selly Oak and, from there, into the city at large. In the 1920s, one in four of Labour councillors and candidates was resident in the ward (which contained only one in thirty of Birmingham's population).

Nor were the Cadburys the only source of middle-class patronage for the Labour movement of King's Norton. In its early years, the Northfield Ward Labour Party was heavily dependent on the support of such men as

---

1. Reedman, op. cit., p. 37;
   Census of England and Wales, 1931; Housing Report and Tables, Table F.
2. The Unionist Messenger, May, 1929.

Harrison Barrow (a Quaker merchant and shop-owner, cousin to George Cadbury Jr.) and Henry Lloyd Wilson (a local Quaker employer).[1] Five of the seven Labour councillors who represented Selly Oak between 1918 and 1931 belonged to the professional and manufacturing middle classes.

The political importance of such middle-class assistance was not that it created the organisations of the independent working-class movement but that it provided a secure and supportive environment for such organisations to develop and thrive. In 1922, there were some 41 trade union branches in the King's Norton Division with a total membership of 8000 to 9000.[2] This strength in depth meant that in 1929 King's Norton could boast 'the best political machine of the Labour Party in the whole of the Midlands.'[3] A dense tissue of working-class and cross-class organisations - stretching from the trades unions and Labour Parties at one end of the spectrum to the Early Morning and Adult Schools (which were peculiarly concentrated in the area) at the other - created a 'common sense' that was Labourist in form and progressivist in content. A socialism had arisen, deeply ethical in analysis and strongly infused with Liberalism, that spoke to the pride and respectability of the local working class whilst corresponding exactly to the high-minded idealism of the area's middle-class radicals. In this way, an apparently contradictory mixture of middle-class patronage from above and working-class self-help from below, an amalgam of deference and self-respect, came together - with especial force in Selly Oak - to form a Labour hegemony that Unionism found it difficult to overturn.

The political challenge in King's Norton as a whole came, to a large degree, from Liberalism. When, in 1922, the Ten Acres and Stirchley Cooperative Society (which served the locality) withdrew its grant from the Cooperative Party, the Management Committee of the Society was said to be firmly in Liberal hands.[4] The strength of Liberal electoral support in

---

1. Northfield Ward Labour Party, 'Northfield Ward Labour Party, 1904-1955', undated duplicate typescript, BCL.
2. Birmingham District Commonwealth, January, 1922.
3. BUA minutes, 14;6;1929.
4. National Labour Party minutes, NEC,26;9;1923.

the other two wards of the Division might be partly ascribed to their larger middle-class population but it certainly reflects too a continuing tradition of working-class Liberalism. Whereas in Selly Oak, Liberalism had been crippled by the defection of two of its leading figures (George Cadbury Jr. and Harrison Barrow had both been Liberal councillors before the First World War) and the overall class balance was tilted towards the working class, in King's Norton and Northfield - with their larger middle-class population, where several popular Liberal councillors remained loyal to the Party - Liberal voting could take place in a more supportive and hopeful atmosphere.

Liberal sympathies remained in north-west Sheffield too, particularly in Walkley where Liberals and Independents won almost half the local election contests. (As official Liberalism was swallowed up in the anti-Labour coalition, many Liberals now stood as Independents.) The explanation for Walkley's politics would seem to lie with the Lib-Lab affiliations of the light trades' workers. Our analysis in chapter 2.8 showed that this was a declining tradition but in Walkley, where it had several prominent upholders, it was one which retained some vigour.

In seeking to account for the strengthening hold of Labour in the local community, we may first note, as in King's Norton, the presence of such independent working-class bodies as the trades unions and Cooperative. In 1918, it was said that the Hillsborough Division contained some 25,000 trades unionists and 12,000 Cooperators.[1] The influence of trade union politics does not need to be re-examined but it is of particular importance in Hillsborough to note the ideological impact of the Cooperative movement for here it was the case, in contrast to that in King's Norton, that Cooperation became the base of a strongly independent working-class politics.

---

1. S.D.I., 30;12;1918.

Hillsborough was the jewel in the crown of the political Cooperative movement with a breadth and depth of organisation and activity second to none in the country.[1] 'The man who made Hillsborough' was Albert Ballard, the Cooperative Party's agent in the Division and an organisational genius. He maintained complete registers of all the constituency's Cooperative members and voters, meticulously cross-referenced with details of their political affiliations and political and Cooperative activities.[2] In the Division itself, a network of party workers was established with, it was said, a 'captain' and a 'lieutenant' covering every 200 houses.[3]

But Ballard fashioned more than a political machine. He laid great stress on the social side of the movement too, and the Hillsborough Cooperative Institute, which he instigated, ran, amongst other things, weekly educational meetings, Sunday morning Fellowship meetings, play-reading groups and children's and adults' choirs. The Cooperative Party itself set up a Ramblers' Club and organised trips and outings in which between 3000 and 4000 people took part annually.[4] Many of those who participated in these various activities were encouraged to become active supporters of Cooperative politics. At one level, Ballard's organisation ensured that every participant in any Cooperative-sponsored activity was recorded and canvassed. More diffusely, there had developed in Hillsborough a total social environment in which working-class consumerism, socialising and political activism had become inseparably interlinked within the all-embracing framework established by the distinct but interactive sections of the Cooperative movement.

The Cooperative Party in Hillsborough was also fortunate to have found in A.V. Alexander a parliamentary representative who understood

---

1. Albert Ballard Papers, ABC 2; A. Lockwood to Ballard, 9;2;1922.
2. SCoP records, CPR28(a); D. Allen, 'Memorandum on the Initiative and Development of the Sheffield Cooperative Party Since its Establishment in 1919' (1959).
3. The Times, 14;10;1924.
4. SCoP records, CPR28(a); D. Allen, op. cit.

and responded to the particular nature of the artisanal community. Eschewing rhetoric and display, Alexander's election meetings were designed to appeal to the intellect as he carefully ran through the issues and topics before the electors.[1] From 1922 to 1950, apart from the brief four year spell between 1931 and 1935, Alexander and Ballard formed a partnership which dominated the politics of Hillsborough.

Cooperation was peculiarly the hallmark of the affluent and self-improving working class. In simple economic terms, it was the upper strata of the working class who were best able to afford the generally high quality but slightly dearer products of the Cooperative stores. At the deeper level, the Cooperative ethos corresponded almost exactly to, indeed was the creation of, that strain of earnest respectability and working-class pride which was located most strongly in the skilled and craft-conscious artisans. In Hillsborough, a form of Cooperative politics had been evolved which both reflected and reinforced the mores and life-style of the artisanal community which it served.

---

1. Alexander Papers, AVAR 10/2; The Wheatsheaf (Brightside and Carbrook Cooperative Society edition), December, 1923.

3.5 Occupational Communities

In analysing the political influence of workplace experience, we have already referred to the strong feelings of occupational loyalty and self-identity to be found amongst the mineworkers of Sheffield and the railway workers of both Birmingham and Sheffield. In this section, these themes are taken up once more and examined particularly in the context of the community which they formed and in which they were evolved.

The chief characteristic of the occupational community is that its members perceive themselves primarily in terms of their occupational role; they identify with their work, their reference group consists of friends and acquaintances belonging to the same workforce, and they choose to socialise outside working hours with these companions rather than with others in different occupations.[1] In some cases, occupational communities may also be geographically isolated from the influences of the wider society.

By such criteria, the mining village is the classic ground of such a community. The economic organisation of the coal industry and the physical nature of the occupation gave rise to highly segregated communities, united both socially and occupationally by a strong sense of their industrial identity.[2] The case of the railway workers is less clear because, though there was a significant degree of residential concentration around the major depots, it occurred generally within neighbourhoods containing a wide variety of other works and occupations. By other criteria though - of self-image, values and associations - research in the 1960s indicated that the sense of occupational community among the railwaymen was still strong.[3] Given the degradation of social status and work practice experienced by the workers of the railways since the Second World War, we

---

1. G. Salaman, Community and Occupation (1974), pp. 21-27.
2. N. Dennis et al., Coal is Our Life (1969), passim.
3. G. Salaman, 'Two Occupational Communities: Examples of a Remarkable Convergence of Work and Non-Work', Sociological Review, 19, (1971).

may assume that the sense of community functioned even more strongly in the interwar period.

Taking the case of the miners first, there is no need to reiterate their strong Labour affiliations and the work-based influences behind them. As to Handsworth, it remained a separate community with its own distinct interests and outlook even after it was incorporated municipally into Sheffield in 1921. Indeed, its split loyalties were shown by the fact that for parliamentary elections it remained part of the mining constituency of Rother Valley, and it was still to mining that it gave its primary allegiance. The 1921 Census showed that the area then covered by the Handsworth Urban District Council contained over 2760 mineworkers, a figure amounting to just over half the total workforce.[1]

Occupational bonding alone would probably have sufficed to form the area's self-identity and separateness but such feelings were further consolidated by the ward's political, commercial and social institutions. Politically, the Handsworth Ward Labour Party remained aloof from Sheffield politics by its decision not to affiliate to the Trades and Labour Council.[2] Commercially, the Handsworth and Woodhouse Industrial Cooperative Society, catering purely for the ward and its immediate locality, maintained its independence from the two larger Sheffield societies. In 1931, its membership of 3040 represented a rate of membership of almost one in five of the adult population.[3] Finally, at the social level, the ward's communal and class image was reinforced by the densest concentration of workingmen's clubs to be found in Sheffield. The total membership of the five workingmen's clubs in Handsworth equalled 1436, a figure amounting to one third of the adult male population if duplicate memberships are discounted.[4]

1. Census of England and Wales, 1921. Yorkshire, Table 17.
2. SFTLC minutes, LP EC 1;12;1931.
3. Report of the Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies; Part 3, Industrial and Provident Societies, 1932.
4. Report of the Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies; Part 3, Industrial and Provident Societies, 1925.

The ideological impact of such class-based and separatist social structures was to encourage the development of a dichotomic world-view. As Lockwood has argued:[1]

> Thinking in terms of two classes standing in a relationship of opposition is a natural consequence of being a member of a closely integrated industrial community with well-defined boundaries and a distinctive style of life.

More recently, it has been contended, correctly, that shared religious and political affiliations may transcend class barriers even in apparently socially divided communities.[2] In the mining areas, however, Labour loyalties and a more sharply defined class analysis of the world had become dominant by the 1920s precisely because the economic and social realities of the coal industry were such as to create a schism between the two sides of industry in which the actuality of conflicting interests and the social divide could no longer be obscured by any apparently shared value-system.

Railway workers did not form distinct, geographically-defined, communities in the same way as the miners but there were, nevertheless, some notable concentrations in both Birmingham and Sheffield. Duddeston was said to contain around 3000 to 4000 railwaymen and their wives, and similar aggregations occurred in Washwood Heath and Saltley.[3] In Sheffield, Neepsend contained the principal concentration of railway workers. In these areas, though the railwaymen were also participant members of a wider working-class community, they possessed their own occupationally-based organisations. Chief amongst these were the railwaymen's clubs of which the ASLEF Club and Institute in Neepsend was a particularly noteworthy example. It was built and financed by the members themselves and contained its own lecture hall, games rooms and bars as well as acting as the centre for numerous educational and sporting activities.[4]

---

1. Lockwood, op. cit., p. 251.
2. R.S. Moore, 'Religion as a Source of Variation in Working-Class Images of Society' in M. Bulmer (ed.), Working-Class Images of Society (1975).
3. B.P., 22;10;1924.
4. Workers' Dreadnought, 11;9;1923.

More unusually, and importantly in view of the fact that the railway industry was an almost exclusively male preserve, the wives and daughters of the railwaymen were also integrated into the occupational community through their own distinct social organisations. Both the NUR and ASLEF organised women's sections which appear to have been well supported and which were also to act as a significant base of Labour support and activity amongst women. In the late 1920s, both the Saltley and Small Heath branches of the NUR Railwaywomen's Guild and the Bournville ASLEF Women's Society were affiliated to the Birmingham Borough Labour Party.[1] Furthermore, at least six of the 18 women Labour councillors and municipal candidates in Birmingham between 1918 and 1931 were railwaymen's wives. Clearly, Labour affiliations and activism were not the sole prerogative of the male workforce but had become part of a structure and ideology which united the railway-working community as a whole.

Such community was further manifested by the close relationship existing between railway worker councillors and the electorates of wards which contained heavy concentrations of their fellow workers. The local popularity of George Sawyer in Duddeston and Councillors Bancroft and Watkins in Neepsend - all of whom were railwaymen - indicates a strong sense of identity uniting representatives and constituents.[2] In Neepsend, the only functioning political body was a branch of the Cooperative Party; as a concrete illustration of the way in which two of the most salient structures in the life of the railway-working community could act together to further working-class political interests, it is worthwhile noting that throughout the 1920s Cllr. Bancroft was run as a joint NUR-Cooperative candidate, each party paying half his expenses.[3]

This collaboration with and participation in the wider organisations of the working class was a feature which distinguished the railway workers from the miners. The unique conjuncture of industrial and social

---

1. BTC Annual Reports, 1926-26 to 1931-32.
2. S.C., December, 1927.
3. SCoP minutes, 29;9;1920; 19;4;1923; 14;1;1926.

circumstances that set the miners apart also inculcated a certain separatism. In the case of the railway workers, socially more integrated into the working-class community as a whole, involvement in the larger structures of working-class life was as much an expression of their particular sense of occupational community as were their more occupationally-defined and limited activities.

In both the workgroups studied here, it has been argued that the form and nature of the occupational communities which they developed were conducive to Labour sympathies; Labour was the party whose class analysis and identity corresponded most closely to the realities of the miners' and railway workers' working and social existence and the ethos which it fostered. The 'them and us' analysis that their life-style encouraged did not necessarily have radical political connotations - it could lead as easily to a politically incorporative and conservative ideology - but, as it happened, the particular experiences of both the miners and railway workers in the interwar period gave them a leading role in left-wing politics.

The case of the Birmingham jewellery workers might seem a convincing example of an occupational community giving rise to distinctly Conservative sympathies. However, though the jewellery workers were united by a shared occupational ethic and distinguished by a certain geographical segregation, they lacked the defining characteristics of the true occupational community in that the industrial structure of their employment prevented the development of specifically workerist organisations and viewpoints and the style of their community lacked formal or class-based structures of social organisation. Middle-class penetration and influence was thus possible in a way in which it was not in the more close-knit and self-aware mining and railway communities.

3.6 The Council Estates

A new form of working-class community that was becoming of increasing importance throughout the 1920s was the municipal estate. The massive housing shortage and a certain idealism occasioned by the War came together to force central and local government to take up seriously for the first time the provision of working-class housing. The results could be spectacular; Birmingham Corporation built 36,825 houses between 1920 and 1931, new estates were developed on a scale which was to completely transform the social character of several of the city's outlying wards. Perry Barr was virtually the creation of council development; from being an almost greenfield site in 1928, 5187 houses were built in the ward by 1931. 97 per cent of the housing stock was municipally owned. By the same date, almost half the houses in Northfield and North Erdington were council houses.[1] Sheffield's total of 9511 municipal houses was more modest but had a comparable impact on some of the city's wards. The population of Manor ward grew by 18,000 between 1921 and 1931 through the construction of 3946 corporation houses.[2]

The new estates were designed to provide low density, high quality housing. Their houses were generally semi-detached or constructed in small rows and clusters, and were separated by wide streets, gardens and open spaces. The major advantage of such planning, of course, was that it created a home environment cleaner and healthier than any most working-class families had hitherto experienced. However, the same conditions weakened the sense of community of the residents because the separation of the housing and the spaciousness of its setting militated against traditional forms of working-class socialising. Community life was debilitated even more in the 1920s by the fact that many of the early estates were developed without proper provision of social amenities such as community halls and public houses.

---

1. Birmingham Medical Officer of Health, Annual Report, 1931, pp. 36-37.
2. A.D.K. Owen, A Report on the Housing Problem in Sheffield (Sheffield,1931), p. 64;
   Census of England and Wales, 1931; Yorkshire, Table 3.

Circumstances imposed a more individuated and privatised life-style than was normal in working-class circles, and some, particularly those from the densely-peopled and socially cohesive traditional working-class communities, found it hard to adjust:[1]

> There are many who regret the loss of the old life, with its intimacies and street corner amenities, many to whom fresh air is no more than a draught, and some to whom light and space are an embarrassment rather than advantages to be prized.

On the Wybourn Estate in Sheffield (a Corporation development earmarked for the rehousing of those from the cleared central slum areas), it was found that one third of the families originally settled there moved back to whence they came.[2]

Before the vast slum clearance programmes of the 1930s, though, the Wybourn Estate was highly unusual in containing a predominantly lower working-class population. Generally speaking, the higher rents of the council houses and additional expenses entailed by life on the municipal estates precluded settlement by all but the upper strata of the working class and the lower middle class. As one commentator noted:[3]

> The housing activities of Birmingham, while far in advance of those of most cities, have solved neither the overcrowding of the worst type nor the slum problem. The cynic might observe that they have, however, been an admirable solution, in many cases, to the problem of the middle-class salary earner wishing to live cheaply in the suburbs on an income of, say, £200 to £350 a year.

The cynic would have overstated the case but there is no doubt that in both Birmingham and Sheffield the new developments were very largely the prerogative of the affluent working class. They also contained a population comprising predominantly young couples with children who were particularly well placed to benefit from the Council's criteria of selection. In both cities, the situation conforms closely to that described by John Burnett:[4]

> In practice, council houses went largely to a limited range of income groups - small clerks and tradesmen, artisans and the better-off

---

1. Owen, op. cit. (1931), p. 37.
2. ibid., pp. 40-41.
3. P.H. Massey, 'Slum', The Architects' Journal, 22;6;1933, p.835.
4. J. Burnett, A Social History of Housing, 1815-1970 (Newton Abbot, 1978), p. 233.

> semi-skilled workers with average-sized families and safe jobs... Typically, then, the council tenant was a man in a "sheltered" manual job which had not been severely endangered by the depression, who earned slightly more than the average wage and had a family of two young children.

As to the politics of the new estates, there was considerable evidence and certainly a widespread contemporary belief that they were bases of strong Labour support. Canvass returns in North Erdington showed, of two of the council developments in the ward, that 'Perry Common was 23 or 24 to one against [the Unionists] and Pype Hayes very little better'.[1] In the 1929 General Election, when Labour succeeded in overturning a 5342 Unionist majority in Erdington, the local Unionists had no hesitation in blaming the council estates for the turn-about.[2] At the level of ward elections, the growth of Labour support appears to have been a slower process. It might have been expected that North Erdington, Northfield and Perry Barr would be returning Labour councillors by the late 1920s but none had done so by 1931. The lower turn-outs of municipal elections and the short-term unpopularity of the 1929-1931 Labour Government would seem at least a partial explanation for this and the fact that both Northfield and Perry Barr 'went Labour' in 1932 seems to back the general view of the council estates as bases of Labour voting.

In Sheffield, Labour sympathies were not so exceptional as they were in the Midlands city so it is perhaps more to be expected that Labour would do well in the new developments. Certainly, the Manor ward was from its inception a Labour stronghold - Labour councillors were returned solidly in every election, even in the crisis year of 1931.

In seeking to explain the predominantly Labour voting of the council tenants, a number of arguments may be put forward. In Birmingham, it is likely that the unsociability of the new estates contributed to the break-up of old allegiances to the Unionist Party which had been so successful in

---

1. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/118/3; W. Wiggins-Davies to Steel-Maitland, 4;11;1927.
2. BUA minutes, 14;6;1929.

building up its political machine and social organs in the central wards. To some extent, the Labour Party had succeeded in establishing its own structures of community organisation. In North and South Erdington and Northfield, Labour Party sections were formed in each of the major new estates while the Women's Section on the Allen's Cross Estate (Northfield) was particularly active in setting up its own concert party and canvassing - several members who were nurses became especially well-known and popular amongst the many young mothers who lived locally.[1] As Labour was extending its organisation and contacts, Unionism was in retreat; in Erdington, Steel-Maitland stated that the Party network 'had fallen to pieces' before the 1929 election and he singled out the council estates as particular weak spots.[2]

On the other hand, it is important not to exaggerate Labour's achievements in this field. Organisation and propaganda continued to depend on an activist minority and sometimes it was the numerical weakness of the Party in the new estates that aroused comment. The Manor Ward branch of the Labour Party in Sheffield was said to have a very poor membership.[3] Labour was not able to construct the social structures of Party support that had been evolved in the older-established working-class communities. The general picture of the home-centred, family-based affluent worker of the new estates remained true even as he was putting his cross by Labour in the polling booth.

If the social structures of the new estates did not in themselves conduce to Labour voting, except perhaps negatively in Birmingham, we have to look towards other explanations of their Labour sympathies. The most important of these is simply that the estates were inhabited by those elements of the working class who were most likely to vote Labour in any case.

---

1. Simmons Papers, vol. 7; Erdington Divisional Labour Party Annual Report, 1931;
   Northfield Ward Labour Party, op. cit., p. 13;
   Interview with Mrs. Potter.
2. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/209; Steel-Maitland to W. Beardmore, 20;12;1929.
3. Park and Heeley Gazette, January, 1930.

Relatively well-off, in steady employment, with a higher than average rate of trades union membership, demonstrably self-improving - it was precisely these characteristics of the workers of the new estates that were generally found to correlate closely with habits of Labour voting. Labour support had become part of this working-class's self-image and it was not merely due to the operation of political favours, as the anti-Labour coalition hinted darkly, that in 1930 twelve of Sheffield's Labour councillors and aldermen were resident on municipal estates.[1]

An allied factor was the apparent working of a generational effect. The population of the estates was young and their political socialisation occurred when Labour was becoming or had become the second party of the country. Labour sympathies came far more easily to this age-group than to their parents and older relatives whose political attitudes were formed when Conservatism and Liberalism reigned unchallenged.There is even some suggestion that a process of political socialisation occurred in reverse; Mrs. Potter of the Allen's Cross Labour Party Women's Section recalls urging the sympathetic young couples of the Estate to try to persuade their parents to vote Labour when they visited them in their homes in the inner wards of the city.[2]

The political complexion of the council constructing the new housing seems to have had little effect. Though the Sheffield Citizens' Alliance accused the socialists of favouring municipal house-building as a means of 'bringing more and more people within their power and influence', the same accusation could hardly be levelled at the Unionists who controlled Birmingham City Council who, through their huge housing programme, appeared to be busy digging their own political grave.[3] Analysing the reasons for the 1929 defeats, the Unionist Chief Agent was forced to conclude:[4]

---

1. The Progressive Standard, N.D., 1930.
2. Interview with Mrs. Potter.
3. The Sheffield Citizen, August, 1927.
4. BUA minutes, 14;6;1929.

> We did not benefit from the progress in housing as those who had obtained houses were not grateful and the building of new houses was no consolation to those still living in bad conditions.

One reason for this apparent ingratitude may have been that those resident in the Corporation estates assessed the municipal house-building programme as manifestation of constructive state intervention and drew socialistic conclusions as a consequence. This, however, is to presuppose an unusually ideological world-view which can only be assumed to have occurred in a minority. More generally, we are forced to return to earlier arguments and suggest that, on the whole, it was not the nature of the new estates themselves but the nature of the working-class population from which they drew which is the chief explanation of their Labour voting. It was to be several years before Labour's particular concern for the interests of council tenants became part of any evolved sense of community identity.

3.7 Conclusion

The principal patterns of working-class community were common to both Birmingham and Sheffield as were, in broad terms, the political loyalties which they generated. Yet the political contrast between the two cities remains undeniable. What factors of class and community might explain their divergence?

At the most straightforward level, there was an important difference in the composition of their working-class populations. The figures below (which are based on the total number of inhabitants per ward) are necessarily imprecise but they are, nevertheless, a useful indicator of the realities of class stratification. Briefly, whereas one third of the population of Birmingham could be said to belong to the slum working class (as gauged by their area of residence), the comparable group in Sheffield formed just one fifth of the city's total population. On the other hand, whereas Labour's proletarian base in East Birmingham amounted to around 11 per cent of the population, the East End of Sheffield was the home of almost one quarter of the city's inhabitants.[1] It is a somewhat crude argument but, clearly, those forms of working-class community which conduced to Conservative sympathies were notably stronger in Birmingham than in Sheffield whilst those forms which encouraged Labour affiliations were correspondingly weaker.

Moreover, there was in Birmingham a greater residential mixing of the classes than in Sheffield where the middle and upper classes lived almost entirely in an exclusive area to the west of the city centre and the main areas of working-class habitation. Zones of upper-class residence were found interspersed with primarily working-class districts throughout Birmingham; Edgbaston ward, which contained both the cream of local society ·

---

1. These statistics are calculated from the figures of ward population given in the 1931 Census and from the details of the Sheffield Medical Officer of Health's registration subdistricts given in Reedman, op. cit., p. 37.

and - in its innermost portion - the poorest of the city's poor, was a particularly graphic example of this social diversity.

This was significant in two respects. Electorally, the pockets of middle-class residence vitiated the impact of the working-class vote because people higher in the social hierarchy have a tendency to vote in greater numbers.[1] Here we may supplement the findings of political science with the more practically oriented work of Albert Ballard's organisation in Hillsborough; in the 1928 municipal elections, they calculated that the working-class areas of the ward polled to only 50 per cent of their strength whilst the middle-class areas polled to some 70 per cent.[2] In the lower polling characteristic of local elections, such differential turn-out could have a significant impact on results.

Conversely, class-based voting has been found to be strongest in areas of single-class residence where the pressures to political conformity were greatest and the sway of cross-class influences weakest.[3] The social uniformity of most of Sheffield's working-class wards meant that political loyalties, once established, tended to be more firmly rooted than those in the more heterogeneous wards of Birmingham where political cross-pressures and class divisions were more marked.

Finally, we should refer to the overall social homogeneity and strongly working-class composition of Sheffield as compared to that of most other major cities. In his research into Sheffield politics undertaken in the 1960s, William Hampton found that not only the working class but the business and professional classes of Sheffield voted Labour at a rate significantly higher than the national average for their respective social strata.[4] This he ascribed to the peculiar nature of the Sheffield community - predominantly manufacturing and proletarian - which 'exerted a group pressure

---

1. K. Newton, 'Turn-out and Marginality in Local Elections', British Journal of Political Science, 2, (1972).
2. S.C., December, 1928.
3. J. Blondel, Voters, Parties and Leaders (Harmondsworth, 1963), p. 65.
4. W. Hampton, Democracy and Community. A Study of Politics in Sheffield (1970), p. 158.

upon the electorate to vote for the Labour Party'.[1] As the figures given in the introduction to this chapter indicate, Sheffield was less exceptional in terms of its class composition in the interwar period than it was to become after the Second World War but it was, nevertheless, a mainly working-class city of unusual uniformity and solidarism. Whereas the forms of Birmingham's economy and society were peculiarly open to middle-class penetration and influence, those of Sheffield might have been designed to inhibit cross-class contacts and inter-class cooperation.

Surprisingly, as the three following chapters will illustrate, the middle-class politicians of Sheffield, rather than seeking to counteract the hostile pressures of their socio-economic terrain, seem to have behaved in such a way as to confirm their operation. It was not inevitable that working people in Sheffield would support the Labour Party in greater numbers than their compatriots elsewhere but social environment and human ineptitude certainly made it appear so.

---

1. Hampton. op. cit., p. 159.

Chapter 4

ORGANISATION AND PROPAGANDA

4.1 Introduction

The importance and effectiveness of good political organisation and propaganda was not, for the most part, that they determined people's ideological sympathies but that they reinforced them and gave them voice. Organisation and propaganda were as much the products of a locality's political norms as their creators but, inasmuch as they were able to maximise and mobilise the potential support latent in their environment, they were a significant influence on the forms of working-class politics.

This chapter examines and contrasts the central machinery, rank and file organisation and propaganda output of the major contenders for political power in Birmingham and Sheffield and attempts, in conclusion, some assessment of their role and impact in the local politics of the two towns.

4.2 The Party Machine

(i) Labour

The heart and directing centre of Labour's political organisation at the municipal level in both Birmingham and Sheffield was the trades council which acted as the forum where delegates from the Divisional Labour Parties and trades unions, Labour councillors and guardians met to formulate and coordinate policy and action. In both towns, but particularly in Sheffield, the close working relations between the political and industrial sides of the trades council and the frequent identity of personnel make any separation of Labour and trades union functions difficult and, in many cases, artificial. In reality, both industrial and political work were practised in the same arena under the common banner of Labour.

The weak trades unionism of Birmingham inevitably had a considerable impact on the Birmingham Trades Council. Between 1920 and 1931, the Council's average annual income from its affiliated societies amounted to just £747. (In Sheffield, a town half the size of Birmingham, the Trades and Labour Council enjoyed a yearly income of £706.)[1] Such poverty was naturally reflected in organisational terms and until 1924 the Birmingham Trades Council and the Borough Labour Party were forced to operate with one chief secretary between them, the able but overworked F.W. Rudland. In 1924, the position was improved somewhat by the appointment of Allen Young to the post of Political Organiser.[2] It is important to note, however,that Young's position was not financed from the local Labour movement's own resources but was funded by two wealthy private individuals - Young's salary and office expenses were paid by George Cadbury Jr. and Harrison Barrow.[3] But while Young was a talented and intelligent administrator, he alone could do little

---

1. BTC, SFTLC Annual Reports.
2. BBLP minutes, 3;4;1924.
3. ibid., Organisation Subcommittee, 11;1;1927; Finance Subcommittee, 5;12;1930.

to counteract the effects of the Birmingham Labour movement's dire financial straits. In 1928, it remained true that the Borough Labour Party:[1]

> had to make the best of a situation in which twelve constituencies had to be organised with a central machinery barely adequate for the proper organisation of one constituency.

Such improvement as occurred in the later 1920s was made possible by two 'external' sources - the trades unions and wealthy Labour candidates. By and large, trades unions were reluctant to run candidates in Birmingham which for most of the interwar period seemed to offer bleak prospects of Labour success; only 11 of the 60 Labour candidates who stood for parliament in Birmingham between 1918 and 1931 were trades union sponsored. Nevertheless, both the ISTC, who sponsored Robert Dennison in King's Norton, and the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, who backed Archibald Gossling's candidature in Yardley, also paid for local agents. The ISTC went further in pledging additionally to pay half the cost of Dennison's propaganda and 90 per cent of his election expenses.[2]

Only two other constituencies had local agents. One was Ladywood where Oswald Mosley was the Division's Labour candidate between 1924 and 1926. Mosley financed the agency of Wilfrid Whiteley out of his own pocket and, when he was reluctantly released by the local Party to fight the Smethwick by-election, it was done only on the express understanding that he would continue to fund the Division until the next General Election to the tune of £450 a year - £350 to go towards the agent's salary (Whiteley acted as both agent and parliamentary candidate until 1929) and £100 towards the cost of the new Labour Hall.[3] In 1929, Mosley was also to contribute £150 to Ladywood's campaign expenses in addition to the £350 he gave to finance the fight in Erdington and Sparkbrook Divisions.[4] The other constituency with a full-time agent was Aston where Mosley's protégé and fellow aristocrat,

---

1. T.C., 28;9;1928.
2. ISTC records, MSS 36, P69; Decisions on Parliamentary Work, 1923.
3. Wilfrid Whiteley Papers, UL6/4; Mosley to Whiteley, 2;4;1928.
4. National Labour Party minutes, Office Arrangements Committee, 4;6;1929.

John Strachey, was Labour's standard-bearer.

The role of O.G. Willey, Labour's parliamentary candidate in West Birmingham, was rather more obscure. In 1926, Harrison Barrow had sought his appointment as an official Labour propagandist in the Midlands and had offered £300 a year towards his salary.[1] The Labour Party NEC rejected this somewhat irregular suggestion but in practice Willey continued to act as a full-time political organiser in the area in an unofficial capacity which was funded by 'one of the Cadburys' according to Austen Chamberlain.[2]

But such patronage could not solve and, indeed, may have reinforced the structural weakness of the Birmingham Labour Party. Throughout the late 1920s,the Borough Labour Party was spending on average something like £90 annually in excess of its income with little prospect of any up-turn in its revenues.[3]

In strictly organisational terms, the Sheffield Labour Party was little better placed. As noted earlier, Hillsborough was well organised and generously funded by the Cooperative Party, but in the late 1920s only two other Divisions had full-time agents - Central, where the National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants sponsored the candidature of P.C. Hoffman, and Park, where George Lathan was the candidate of the RCA.[4] The return of Alderman Fred Marshall as the NUGMW's candidate in Brightside in 1930 secured another funded agency in that Division.[5]

Not surprisingly though, given the strength of the local trades union movement and the more propitious electoral circumstances, Sheffield was far more attractive to trades union sponsored candidatures than Birmingham. Other national bodies, such as the ILP, were also more willing to invest in election fights in Sheffield. Consequently, whereas 62 per cent of

---

1. National Labour Party minutes, Organisation Subcommittee, 26;7;1926.
2. Austen Chamberlain Papers, AC5/1/561; Austen to Ida Chamberlain, 24;10;1931.
3. BBLP minutes, Report of Finance Subcommittee, 1930.
4. National Labour Party minutes, Organisation Subcommittee, 26;4;1926.
5. ibid., NEC, 26;2;1930.

Birmingham's parliamentary candidates were locally financed (many, in fact, being supported by private money), in Sheffield the proportion was just 39 per cent. 12 of Sheffield's 36 parliamentary candidates between 1918 and 1931 were run by national political bodies and 10 were trades union sponsored. There were some financial contributions from the rich. Tom Snowden gave £130 to his election expenses in the 1923 and 1924 contests in Central, and Cecil Wilson paid the bulk of his expenses in Attercliffe.[1] On the other hand, Arthur Ponsonby pleaded poverty and sought as much financial support from his Brightside Divisional Party as was possible.[2] In general, Sheffield did not attract, nor had need of, the type of éminence grise who played such an important role in the Birmingham Labour movement.

(ii) Anti-Labour

The chief organisation of Birmingham Unionism was the Birmingham Conservative and Unionist Association formed in 1918 by the fusion of the local Conservative and Liberal Unionist bodies. On its establishment, the Association was provided with six divisional agents and a central staff comprising a Chief Agent, four clerks and a book-keeper but Labour's electoral progress was such that in 1923 it was agreed to appoint an agent in every division.[3] The money to pay for the upkeep of this comprehensive political machine came principally from Birmingham's Unionist M.P.s themselves and from local businesses and businessmen. Of its income of £10,296 in 1923, £2203 came from the M.P.s and £6529 in donations; the contribution of individual subscriptions and fund-raising amounted to £1564.[4] The total revenue of the Birmingham Trades Council in the same year came to just £2093.[5]

---

1. National Labour Party minutes, Organisation Subcommittee, 26;4;1926; Francis Johnson Correspondence; Wilson to Clifford Allen, 12;9;1922.
2. Francis Johnson Correspondence; Ponsonby to Clifford Allen, 28;5;1922.
3. Neville Chamberlain Papers, NC5/10/12; Draft estimate of running costs of central organisation, 18;9;1918; BUA minutes, 9;11;1923.
4. Neville Chamberlain Papers, NC5/10/93; Draft statement of accounts, 1923.
5. BTC Annual Report, 1923-1924, p. 26.

But even to examine the statistics of the central organisation alone would be to underestimate the financial strength of the Birmingham Unionist movement for M.P.s and industrialists contributed large sums to divisional organisation too. Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland estimated that he spent between £450 and £500 a year on his Erdington constituency - a sum made up of his £150 subscription to the Birmingham Unionist Association, £100 subscription to the Erdington Unionist Association, and Lady Steel-Maitland's financial contributions to the local paper and children's entertainments but which omitted his donations to local charities and societies.[1] The Erdington Association was also able to call upon the financial support of local businesses; in 1929, donations amounting to £400 were received from GEC, the Metropolitan Carriage Company and Wolseleys.[2] Nor was Erdington wholly exceptional in the financial resources upon which it could draw; the Duddeston M.P., J.B. Burman, spent an average of £460 a year on his constituency during the period of his parliamentary career and in the election year of 1929 he spent over £1260.[3]

There exists no comparable depth of information on Sheffield but, given the organisational weakness of the middle-class parties in the working-class constituencies of the city, the bulk of the money spent on organisation and propaganda there clearly came from the candidates themselves, from friendly companies and wealthy supporters. In 1919, it was laid down that the Divisional Conservative Parties should contribute £50 a year to the central machinery while the local M.P.s were expected to give £250, of which £200 was to go towards supporting a constituency agent.[4]

At the municipal level, almost all the income of the Sheffield

---

1. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/118/3; Steel-Maitland to Edwards, 19;10;1927.
2. ibid., GD193/209; B. Docker to Steel-Maitland, 12;3;1928; W. Morris to Steel-Maitland, 8;1;1929; N.J. Railing to Steel-Maitland, 29;1;1929.
3. K.W.D. Rolf, 'Tories, Tariffs and Elections: the West Midlands in English Politics, 1918-1935', Ph. D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1974, p. 150.
4. Brightside Conservative Association minutes, 17;6;1919.

Citizens' Alliance came from the 'Sheffield Ratepayers' Economy Committee', a body set up by and comprising representatives of most of the more important local firms and businesses. In 1926, leaked documents revealed that of the Economy Committee's total income of £2223 (almost wholly contributed in donations of £50 to £100 from local companies), £1940 was made over directly to the Citizens' Alliance.[1] The Sheffield Citizens' Alliance was, in every sense, the creature of local industrial interests with little community role or sustenance. In those few areas of Sheffield where the politics of the Right was strong, the predominantly middle-class activists preferred to channel their political input into the traditional party system.

Except in those areas where electorally it was least needed, anti-Labour organisation was undoubtedly weak in Sheffield. It was not until 1929 that the Citizens' Alliance appointed a special organiser charged with the responsibility of strengthening their political machinery; until that time, as even the local Labour Party admitted, Labour's opponents do not appear to have taken the question of organisation seriously.[2]

---

1. S.F., March, 1926.
2. SFTLC minutes, Report on Result of Municipal Elections, 1930, 17;1;1931.

4.3 Rank and File Organisation

(i) Labour

The Labour Party as such began the enrollment of individual members only in 1918 and it took some time for the Party to establish a comprehensive network of local branches. This was particularly the case in Birmingham where it was not until 1924 that Divisional Labour Parties were set up in Edgbaston, Moseley and Handsworth.[1] Nevertheless, by the mid-twenties, the Labour Party had succeeded in creating an impressive array of locally-based branches and activities. In 1926 in Birmingham as a whole, there were 28 ward parties or sections, 20 Labour Party Women's Sections and 6 branches of the Labour Party League of Youth in existence.[2] There was in addition the still flourishing apparatus of the ILP which boasted 16 parties in the city as well as 3 branches of its own youth section, the Guild of Youth.[3] The Young Socialists' League, an independent off-shoot of the local Labour movement, organised a further 5 junior sections.[4] Finally, there were 4 branches of the Cooperative Party operating in the city in the mid-1920s.[5] After 1926, there was little further organisational advance in the interwar years and so far as the ILP in Birmingham was concerned the year marked a peak from which the Party began its long-term and ultimately fatal decline.

As to the actual memberships, there is unfortunately a paucity of hard information. The individual membership of the Labour Party in Birmingham seems to have increased from around 3000 in 1924 to something over 6000 in 1930.[6] The ILP had a fluctuating membership which probably averaged out at around 900 to 1000 through most of the 1920s.[7] As to the

---

1. Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1924, p. 280.
2. Calculated from reports in the Town Crier and Borough Labour Party and Trades Council minutes.
   For youth sections, see: National Labour Party minutes, Organisation Subcommittee, 21;6;1926.
3. BTC Annual Report, 1926-1927, p. 40.
4. T.C., 30;4;1926.
5. BTC Annual Report, 1926-1927, p. 40.
6. BBLP minutes, 14;2;1924; 28;4;1930.
7. Labour Leader, 7;10;1920; T.C., 13;4;1928.

Cooperative Party, the only indication we have as to its local strength is the total of 225 members affiliated to the Borough Labour Party in 1928.[1] Given that most members of the ILP and many members of the Cooperative Party would have been individual members of the Labour Party, we may estimate that there were approximately 6500 fully paid-up members of the Labour movement in Birmingham by the end of the 1920s.

In Sheffield, Divisional Labour Parties had been established in six of the city's seven constituencies by 1921, the only exception being Central where, owing to the poverty of the local working class and the intervention of some unofficial Labour activists, a properly constituted and recognised Divisional Party was not set up until 1924.[2] As to local organisation and taking 1926 as our point of reference once more, there were gaps in the party network which,at first glance, seem surprising. Of the 17 wards in the city, only 10 had local Labour Party branches. Of those that did not, two were in Central, two were in the predominantly middle-class Ecclesall Division and two were in the Attercliffe Division which, due to its compact and homogeneous structure, was organised on a unitary basis.[3] In Neepsend, the Cooperative Party was the only functioning political organisation. There were, in addition, 10 Labour Party Women's Sections but only one constituency, Park, appears to have had any organisation catering for young socialists.[4]

The ILP in Sheffield also had a weak local organisation. With the demise of the Attercliffe branch in 1922, there remained just one branch of the ILP catering for the entire city though it maintained some form of local presence through its delegates to the Divisional Labour Parties and ad hoc sections called together for the municipal elections. There was also a

---

1. BBLP minutes, 26;11;1928.
2. Labour Party Annual Conference Reports, 1921, p. 129; 1924, pp. 283-88.
3. National Labour Party minutes, Organisation Subcommittee, 26;4;1926.
4. Calculated from reports in the Sheffield Forward and the Sheffield Cooperator;
   For youth section, see: National Labour Party minutes, Organisation Subcommittee,21;6;1926.

a branch of the ILP Guild of Youth.[1] The Cooperative Party was a little more comprehensively structured for, in addition to the coordinating city-wide Sheffield Cooperative Party, it possessed a divisional organisation in Hillsborough and ward branches in Hillsborough and Neepsend, both of which ran associated women's sections.[2]

It is not possible to give more than approximate indications of the memberships of the various working-class parties. The affiliated memberships of the seven Divisional Labour Parties to the Trades and Labour Council suggest that by 1931 there were around 2250 individual Labour Party members in Sheffield.[3] The ILP had a paid-up membership of approximately 500 in 1927.[4] The Cooperative Party appears to have functioned on a much looser basis and it was not until 1926 that the Hillsborough Divisional Party inaugurated a specific membership list in addition to its ordinary roll of supporters. As a minimum subscription of just 6d. a year was agreed upon, it does not seem useful to define any figure of membership which was clearly an elastic concept in the Party's thinking.[5]

(ii) Anti-Labour

The tradition of political organisation first established by the Birmingham Caucus in 1868 lived on in Birmingham Unionism. Though, as we noted, most of its income came from wealthy individuals and industrialists, the Birmingham Unionist Association still sought, with considerable success, to enroll a mass membership. To this end, each constituency in the city possessed a comprehensive network of Unionist ward committees, women's branches and junior sections. As might be expected, the most middle-class divisions were the ones with the largest memberships but several working-class constituencies also provided very large numbers of dues-paying

---

1. S.F., June, 1924.
2. S.C., passim.
3. SFTLC Annual Report, 1931.
4. S.D.I., 30;12;1927.
5. S.C., February, 1926.

sympathisers; in 1930, around 1000 people paid subscriptions in Deritend, 2200 in West Birmingham and 800 in Yardley. In the six constituencies for which fairly precise statistics are given in 1930, the Unionists enrolled 14,200 individual members, which suggests that in Birmingham as a whole there must have been around 20,000 individual subscribers to Unionist Party funds.[1] This figure represents a quite remarkable mass endorsement of Unionist politics and it omits to take into account the women's branches which were separately organised though they shared a large, overlapping membership with the Unionist committees as such. In 1930, there were 15,672 individual women members of the local Unionist women's associations of Birmingham.[2]

The only qualification to be made to these statistics is that they do not by any means represent an active or even much politicised membership. A large part of Unionism's appeal in Birmingham was deliberately couched in overtly non-political terms. The men were treated to smoking concerts in the local pubs, the women to shows in the neighbourhood's schools; and the Unionist women's branches, in particular, functioned primarily as places where the local wives and mothers could meet socially to enjoy some congenial company and entertainment. Those men and women who joined the Labour movement were, for the most part, making a decision of far more positive commitment and awareness. But this argument should not be taken too far. In the first place, the women, who formed the majority of the Birmingham Unionist Association's subscribers, consistently carried out most of the routine but essential clerical work in the election campaigns and easily out-performed the men in their active political commitment.[3] In the second place, it was precisely <u>because</u> Unionism was able to make its message and role appear non-political that it was so successful amongst the working-class electorate. By taking an active part in the community life of the

---

1. BUA minutes, 10;1;1930; 14;3;1930; 10;10;1930.
2. <u>ibid.</u>, 10;10;1930.
3. <u>ibid.</u>, 13;4;1923; 6;9;1929; 10;12;1931.

city, Birmingham Unionism reinforced the cross-class and localistic ideology which it espoused. It was through its depoliticisation that Unionism in Birmingham went furthest towards creating the political culture that upheld its hegemony.

Liberal organisation in Birmingham was, in terms of its mass support and electoral impact, an almost negligible quantity. The only partial exception to this generalisation occurred in Sparkbrook where, through their active involvement in the district tenants' association, the Liberals had succeeded in establishing a worthwhile local presence.[1]

In view of the unique political evolution of the Midlands city, it is not surprising to find that there was no comparable depth of anti-Labour organisation in Sheffield. For parliamentary purposes, the Conservatives organised all seven of the city's divisions but the strength of political opposition meant that the structure of party branches was far weaker than in Birmingham. Hillsborough, where Liberal and Cooperative opposition was strong, and Attercliffe, where Labour was dominant, were noted as particular weak spots.[2] The Conservatives also had a hard row to furrow in Brightside where, though there was a Divisional Committee and an active 'Ladies' Association', efforts to found junior and workingmen's sections were unavailing.[3] In fact, the only working-class constituencies with comprehensive Conservative organisation were Park and Central where in both there were strong pre-war traditions of working-class Conservatism which survived to influence their political affiliations in the 1920s.[4] Of indigenous Liberalism, except in the isolated work of a few individuals, there is no trace.

---

1. The Spark, February, 1928.
2. Sheffield Conservative and Unionist Association, AGM minutes, 23;3;1921. The Times, 15;12;1923.
3. Brightside Conservative Association minutes, 15;7;1921.
4. Park Division Women's Unionist Council minutes, 1931, passim. Central Division Women's Conservative Association minutes, June, 1930.

At the municipal level, the lion's share of the political arrangements were undertaken by the Sheffield Citizens' Alliance which claimed in 1923 to have local sections in twelve of the city's wards and women's branches in thirteen.[1] There is little evidence that most of these had any active existence outside of election periods, however, and there is no suggestion that the Citizens' Alliance played or sought to play anything approaching the role in the local community which the Unionists of Birmingham had achieved.

There is, overall, a lack of documentation for the anti-Labour forces of Sheffield which stands in marked contrast to the copious records of Unionism in Birmingham. This in itself is not merely accidental but reflects at a deeper level the generally weaker structure and activism of the parties of the Right in Sheffield where history and environment were far less conducive to a populist opposition to Labour than in Birmingham.

---

1. Sheffield Citizen, September, 1923.

4.4 Political Propaganda: the Press

If the organisational frameworks described above formed the basic structure of the political parties, what gave them their raison d'être and popular impact was propaganda. Probably the most influential organs of political opinion in the interwar period were the newspapers and journals.

The consistently anti-Labour bias of the press has guaranteed it a particularly prominent place in the Labour movement's demonology and nowhere was this bias more pronounced than in Birmingham where the two major local newpapers, the Birmingham Post and the Birmingham Mail, were virtually the official organs of Unionism. Personal visits by Neville Chamberlain in 1919 brought the two editors firmly into line and thereafter the Birmingham Unionist Association went on public record several times to thank the Post and the Mail for their material contribution to Unionism's electoral victories. In what little space it received, the Labour case was consistently distorted and derided; coverage did not extend much beyond the stock cartoon image of a Labour activist depicted as a sinister but slightly ridiculous figure complete with beard, beaver hat and hissing bomb. The Birmingham Gazette, the Liberal evening paper, was fairer but its circulation was smaller and it had little of the local influence possessed by its more prestigious Unionist counterparts.

The Sheffield equivalents to the Post and Mail were the Sheffield Daily Telegraph and the Sheffield Evening Telegraph and Star. Their role was to bolster local Conservatism; as the Telegraph's editor quite candidly told Labour leader, E.G. Rowlinson, 'we aren't in the business of giving you free publicity'.[2] But significantly, the Liberal newspapers, which gave Labour sympathetic coverage, had a far larger impact than those in Birmingham.

---

1. BUA minutes, 8;10;1920;
   Straight Forward, December, 1920; BUA minutes, 14;11;1930; 13;11;1931.
2. J.S. Rowett, 'The Labour Party and Local Government: Theory and Practice in the Interwar Years', Ph. D. thesis, University of Oxford, 1979, p. 37.

In 1920, the Sheffield Daily Independent had a circulation of 65- to 69,000 compared with the Telegraph's 57- to 59,000, whilst the Liberal Sheffield Mail battled it out on even terms with the Telegraph's evening sister paper.[1] The Sheffield Mail, in particular, anxious to establish its reputation, gave powerful service to the Labour cause. In 1923 and 1924, it provided E.G. Rowlinson with a regular daily column during the municipal election campaigns, and in 1923 the paper's exposé of Citizens' Alliance slum landlord councillors on the Health Committee undoubtedly played some part in the Labour victories.[2]

Labour never expected too much help from the capitalist media, though, and it hoped to strengthen its propaganda by the establishment of its own newspapers. In Birmingham, the local Labour paper, the Town Crier was published weekly from 1919 and through the devoted efforts and journalistic ability of its editor, Will Chamberlain, it was able to provide the local working-class movement with a consistently bright organ and forum of Labour opinion. But there is no evidence that it succeeded in reaching a readership beyond the Labour faithful for whom there was, in any case, no need of political conversion. The best estimates suggest that its circulation stood at around 1500 in the early 1920s and rose gradually to some 3000 after the 1929 General Election.[3] Obviously, in relation to the 40,000 odd circulation of the Birmingham Post and the wider readership of the more populist Mail, this was a paltry figure indeed.[4] In practice, the importance of the Town Crier lay not in its popular impact but in the service it gave to the local Labour movement for which it acted as a mouthpiece, informant and source of identity.

A similar role was carried out in Sheffield by the Labour-sponsored Sheffield Forward. The Forward fulfilled its propaganda role even less

---

1. S.D.I., 10;3;1921.
2. Sheffield Mail, 29;20;1923; S.D.I., 27;10;1923
3. P. Drake, 'The Town Crier. Birmingham's Labour Weekly, 1919-1951' in A. Wright, R. Shackleton (eds), Worlds of Labour: Essays in Birmingham Labour History (Birmingham, 1983), p. 109.
4. H.R.G. Whates, The Birmingham Post, 1857-1957 (Birmingham, 1957), p. 191.

successfully, though, as it was a monthly, published only from 1921 to 1927, which possessed on closure a circulation of just 1100.[1]

As few people could be persuaded to buy Labour newpapers, it became necessary for the local Labour movement to give them away. A number of Divisional Labour Parties published free newpapers, largely supported by advertising and distributed at no cost by the Party members themselves. Most, such as the Yardley Labour Torch and the King's Norton Labour News in Birmingham and the Park and Heeley Gazette in Sheffield, were published at monthly intervals though on occasion their appearances became more infrequent. The Park and Heeley Gazette was one of the most successful of these efforts, pushing its circulation up from 8000 in 1922 to 18,500 in 1929 by which time it was even making a small profit.[2] The greater wealth of the Cooperative movement meant that the Cooperative Party was able to distribute freely a number of organs of Cooperative politics for which the advertising largely derived from the movement's commercial side. The Birmingham District Commonwealth, the Deritend Commonwealth and the Sheffield Cooperator put forward the Cooperative and Labour case in the two cities. In all, the free Labour newspapers of Birmingham probably reached 35,000 households when at their peak in 1930, whilst those in Sheffield were being circulated to 49,000 households.[3]

Such Labour propaganda was not, of course, allowed a free run in either city. In Birmingham in particular, the Unionists responded vigorously with the distribution of their own free newspapers, broadsheets and leaflets and the wealth of the Unionist machine was such that these could be published in huge quantities, often with the help of commercial distribution. For example, it was estimated in May, 1927 that some 350,000 leaflets had been distributed in the city; in December, 1928, the eight

---

1. SFTLC minutes, 15;11;1927.
2. S.F., February, 1922; Labour Organiser, March, 1929.
3. Calculated from the newspapers' own circulation figures.

Divisions which filed returns gave figures suggesting that 52,000 papers and pamphlets had been circulated to the local electorates.[1]

In Sheffield, characteristically, opposition to Labour was far weaker. The Citizens' Alliance began the publication of a monthly free journal with a print run of 50,000 copies in 1923 but it folded in 1927.[2] When the Citizens' Alliance was revamped as the Municipal Progressive Party in 1929, the latter issued a paper called the Progressive Standard which was distinguished by its very infrequent appearance and lack of circulation figures.

Though provincial papers had a larger circulation and greater influence in the interwar period than they have today, it has, of course, been a serious omission to ignore the impact of the national press. The only national newpaper to support the Labour Party was the Daily Herald but throughout the 1920s its circulation was small when compared to those of its rivals. Even in the Labour stronghold of Sheffield, the Herald sold only 2200 copies daily in 1922.[3] With no other details of national newspaper sales in the localities, we can only re-state the obvious point which is that most working-class newspaper readers took their news and opinions from organs which were, in varying degrees, anti-Labour. That many voted Labour despite the 'dope' from Fleet Street suggests that we should look beyond the press to examine the influence of other forms of political propaganda.

---

1. BUA minutes, 26;5;1927; 14;12;1928.
2. Sheffield Citizen, September, 1925.
3. SFTLC minutes, 5;9;1922.

4.5 Political Propaganda: Meetings, Canvassing and Marches

(i) Labour

Lacking the resources to spread its message through conventional channels, Labour was forced to rely on cheaper and more direct means of reaching its public. One of the most important of these was the street-corner meeting. At any spot where an audience might be found, Labour activists would set up their improvised platforms to claim the attention of the passing public using the only means at their disposal, their voices and rhetorical ability. At first they would be talking into thin air but gradually a knot of interested or curious listeners would congregate - some staying, others drifting away - until by the end of the meeting perhaps thirty or forty people were listening to the arguments being put forward and receiving the literature being distributed by the other Labour supporters present. Even the meetings in the quieter back-streets and courts could reach sizeable audiences as those indoors or relaxing on the doorsteps paused to listen to this diversion from their usual evening routine.[1] These open-air meetings, concentrated in the summer months and during the November municipal election campaign, in which everyone could participate and the venues were free, were the ideal propaganda vehicle for the poverty-stricken but idealistic local Labour Parties.

They were supplemented at a more formal level by the less frequent meetings arranged to give a hearing to the local Labour councillors and candidates. These were usually held in local school halls and during election times as many as three meetings a night would be addressed in different parts of the ward or constituency.

Finally, there were the large, set-piece public meetings organised when the local Labour Party had been able to secure the presence of one of

---

1. Interviews with Ted Smallbone, Lily Moody and Ray Jones.

one of the great names of the Labour movement. Jim Simmons, later to be a Labour M.P. and propagandist himself, recalled the impact that these occasions had on him and others in the days of his youth:[1]

> the young socialists...were unashamed hero-worshippers; names meant something to us and a meeting to be addressed by one of our working-class heroes was an event we looked forward to for weeks before it took place.

A meeting addressed by Ramsay MacDonald in the Smithfield Market in Birmingham in 1924 was attended by 35,000 people. The almost spiritual impact of an assembly of such size and enthusiasm on the Labour activists present can be imagined, and Will Chamberlain, editor of the Town Crier, came close to articulating such an emotion when he described the '"lumpy" feeling in the throat and an absurd inclination to laugh and cry at the same time' that he experienced as MacDonald was roared onto the platform.[2] These meetings accomplished more than the mere dissemination of political propaganda. To the Labour activists in attendance, they were occasions of justification and rededication, times when their humble and prosaic work in the Labour Party was once more related to the great tasks and ideals of the Movement as a whole. To the general public who went along, they were entertainment, an opportunity to see a celebrity in the flesh, to enjoy some good heckling and participate in an atmosphere and an event far removed from their workaday lives.

As to publicity, Labour, unable to afford the more expensive posters and leaflets, relied heavily on 'chalking'. Late at night, being careful to avoid the attentions of any passing policemen, local activists would set off around their neighbourhood to write the details of forthcoming meetings, the latest political slogans and such like on the pavement in chalk.[3] Such was the importance of this form of advertising to the Labour movement that when the Birmingham Watch Committee threatened a by-law prohibiting

---

1. J. Simmons, Soap Box Evangelist (Chichester, 1972), pp. 13-14.
2. T.C., 24;10;1924.
3. Interview with Ray Jones.

chalking, the Borough Labour Party wrote to the Home Secretary in protest.[1]

However, even as the 1920s progressed, the political meeting was in decline. The outdoor meetings, in particular, were losing their impact on an electorate which was increasingly educated and sophisticated; and the widening availability of other forms of entertainment (for this was a major part of the meetings' attractiveness to the uncommitted) such as the cinema and wireless, even Sunday opening of the parks, reduced the audiences they reached.[2] A second and related factor in their decline was the growing realisation amongst Labour workers that the meetings were failing to get at large sections of the electorate. As early as 1923, a Sheffield activist had concluded that 'street-corner propaganda has served its day and generation. We do not get into contact with the people who matter with either open-air or indoor meetings'.[3]

In Birmingham, where the odds against Labour were far stronger, the question of tactics aroused particular concern. An inquest into the 1922 parliamentary election campaign recorded that Labour had failed deplorably in all the more systematic forms of electoral work. Canvassing, knocking-up of known supporters on the day, even the basic task of compiling lists of sympathisers were almost entirely neglected. The report concluded that:[4]

> There was no lack of willing workers, but there was a great lack of coordination and instruction of workers as to their respective duties during the campaign...
> It is unfortunately too true that in the past Labour has relied too much on what may be termed mass (or mob) action at election times, and has not seriously tackled the question of effective organisation.

One direct result of this criticism was Allen Young's appointment as Political Organiser and there is more general evidence that the Birmingham Labour movement made serious efforts in the later 1920s to make its methods of propaganda more electorally effective. Here, King's Norton, a division with a relatively affluent and educated working class and its own agent, was in

---

1. BBLP minutes, 26;1;1931.
2. Interview with Lily Moody; T.C., 28;2;1930.
3. S.F., August, 1923.
4. BBLP minutes, Report of Organisation Subcommittee, 1923.

the van.[1] Many of the other Divisional Parties, beset by problems of finance and small memberships, lacked either the means or the ability to introduce any of the more 'scientific' forms of electoral organisation espoused by Head Office and its local protégés.

There was, however, a definite shift towards more direct and personal means of contacting the electorate. By personal visits, face-to-face discussion and practical representative work, Labour councillors and workers were gradually able to establish an accepted presence in the wards which did much to dispel the Mail's caricature of the untrustworthy and disreputable 'Bolshie'. In the 1929 election, such work was redoubled; few areas were able to organise a complete and systematic canvass but doorstep work during the campaign and the whipping-up of supporters on the day were the key-notes of Labour's strategy.[2]

There is no evidence that the nature of Labour propaganda in Sheffield differed in any significant way from that in Birmingham. Only in two divisions were records and resources such as to enable the systematic canvassing of the local electorate: Hillsborough was one; the other, Park, was similar both in that it catered for a relatively well-off working-class population and in its possession (in the person of E.G. Rowlinson) of an able and resourceful agent. In Central Division, the same circumstances militated against the more sophisticated forms of propaganda work as prevailed in the central wards of Birmingham. In Brightside and Attercliffe, however, the problems were rather those of success than failure. By the late 1920s, Brightside had become an apparently safe Labour seat and when, in 1930, the local Party was called upon to fight a parliamentary by-election, it was found ill-prepared for the task. G.R. Shepherd (Labour's chief national agent) discovered:[3]

The Labour Party organisation in the Division consisted of a

---

1. Labour Organiser, April, 1926.
2. BUA minutes, 14;6;1929.
3. National Labour Party minutes, NEC, 26;2;1930.

> comparatively small number of individual members and it had not been taught the essentials of electoral organisation and procedure.

Labour won the by-election despite these misgivings so perhaps this apparent organisational weakness in a staunch Labour constituency was not so surprising. Generally, as the particular case of Brightside makes plain, there were far fewer agonisings on questions of organisation and propaganda in Sheffield than in Birmingham. Labour's early electoral successes and the inadequacies of its opponents ensured that such topics assumed a far less urgent importance than they did in the hard-pressed Birmingham Labour movement.

(ii) Anti-Labour

The financial strength, organisational spread and propaganda output of the Unionist movement of Birmingham stood unrivalled and, at times, taken in conjunction with a blatantly partisan press, they must have seemed to present almost insuperable obstacles to Labour's advance. It was simply, in the words of the New Leader, the 'most efficient Tory machine in the country'.[1] Labour's efforts in most areas of propaganda activity were matched and surpassed. Labour was even worsted in the field of outdoor meetings which were traditionally the prerogative of the indigent parties of the Left; in the summer of 1927, it was reported that the Unionists had arranged an average of 53 open-air meetings per week.[2] Furthermore, the sheer number of Unionist subscribers in the city and the organisational skills available to every division through its local agent and the central party machinery meant that most areas were reached by the numerous social-cum-political entertainments discussed earlier and that nearly all were thoroughly canvassed. At election times in particular, the Unionists had the additional advantage that they could call upon a generous supply of motor cars, loaned by wealthy supporters, by which to transport sympathisers to the polls and even, it was claimed, attract the votes of wavering electors. The perceived scale of

---

1. New Leader, 14;9;1928.
2. BUA minutes, 16;11;1928.

electoral advantage achieved by the Unionists through these means and the allegedly corrupt use to which they were put led Labour supporters in the early 1920s to call for a ban on the use of cars at election times; some went further in demanding the prohibition of all forms of canvassing.[1]

Such pleas were heard less often in the latter part of the decade principally, no doubt, because Labour was making progress despite the electoral disadvantages it suffered. But as the Labour threat to their Birmingham power-base became daily more tangible, the efforts of the local Unionists to counteract Labour propaganda became even stronger. During the late 1920s, Unionist propaganda reached almost fever pitch; in 1928 and 1929, there were, at peak, at least 50 meetings - of a variously social, political or 'educational' character - being organised in the city under Unionist auspices weekly.[2] The 1929 General Election saw the culmination of this activity. There was a complete canvass in almost every division while local efforts were supplemented by the £1400 spent by the central association on paid distribution of propaganda bulletins, the provision of speakers for outdoor meetings and the hiring of 'missioners' to canvass hostile areas.[3] In the event, of course, it was a salutary reminder of what organisation and propaganda could not achieve, however liberally-funded and comprehensive, that the Unionists lost six seats.

Unfortunately, there is not sufficient documentation of anti-Labour efforts in Sheffield to allow more than a few generalisations on the situation in that city. A similar variety of open-air and indoor meetings was held but canvassing activity, given the more feeble organisational presence discussed earlier, was inevitably weaker. The bulk of such electoral work as did take place was carried out by the women members of the Conservative Party or Citizens' Alliance though it was sometimes necessary

---

1. T.C., 5;12;1919; 17;12;1920.
2. BUA minutes, 16;11;1928; 8;3;1929.
3. ibid., 8;3;1929.

to add to their efforts with paid help.[1] In general, local party efforts were highly dependent on the wealth and generosity of the parliamentary candidates and their middle-class supporters but there was little of that close personal involvement of M.P.s and candidates which existed in Birmingham and organisational loyalties and activism were far weaker. Whereas in Birmingham the Labour movement viewed its opponents' political machine with something approaching awe, in Sheffield Labour politicians could even afford to be a little contemptuous of their challengers, going so far in 1926 to accuse the Citizens' Alliance of a 'hopeless inability to organise even their election fights efficiently'.[2]

The only important form of Labour propaganda which remains to be covered is the march. A number of such demonstrations occurred in both Birmingham and Sheffield during the 1920s, directed variously against such things as the allied intervention against Russia in 1920, the inadequacy of unemployment relief and the 1927 Trade Disputes Act. More important than these occasional protests, though, was the Labour movement's annual celebration of May Day.

As Ben Pimlott has argued, demonstrations were essentially 'expressive, rather than instrumental, declarations of faith, rather than displays of power'.[3] This was particularly the case with May Day which the chairwoman of Birmingham's May Day Demonstration Committee described as:[4]

> a great gesture, an assertion in every town, in every country, that we are at one with our fellow workers, in suffering, in faith, in Hope and Determination. It is our Holy Day.

These were not idle words because in Birmingham especially May Day was the high point of Labour's annual calendar. By the late 1920s, around 20,000 people were participating in the procession each year, and in 1926, just

---

1. Sheffield Conservative Women's Advisory Committee minutes, 9;5;1932; Park Division Women's Unionist Council minutes, 7;4;1932.
2. S.F., December, 1926.
3. B. Pimlott, 'The Labour Left' in C. Cook, I. Taylor (eds), The Labour Party. An Introduction to its History, Structure and Politics (1980), p. 182.
4. T.C., 24;4;1925.

days before the industrial crisis erupted into the General Strike, 30,000 people took to the streets in what was clearly a powerful and emotional expression of their support for the miners.[1] 8 bands and 18 tableaux, arranged by various working-class groups under such evocative titles as 'Hope', 'Awakening' and 'The Power of the Vote', took part in the 1926 parade.[2]

In Sheffield, the local Labour movement's celebration of May Day peaked in the early 1920s when some 5000 marchers were taking part each year. By 1930, only around 500 people were attending the demonstration and there was serious consideration given to cancelling the procession altogether owing to lack of support.[3]

It seems surprising at first glance that the strong Sheffield Labour movement should have been up-staged by its far weaker Birmingham counterpart but it was probably precisely because the Birmingham movement was numerically small and electorally unsuccessful that its activists took the opportunity provided by May Day to reaffirm their socialist commitment and express their mutual solidarity. The sense of power and purpose given by the May Day demonstration was far more important to the embattled minority of Labour supporters in Birmingham than it was to the Labour Party in Sheffield which, through its electoral victories, had come to be more concerned with problems of policy than political ritual.

---

1. B.M., 3;5;1926.
2. Birmingham Trades Council and Labour Party Demonstration Committee, Souvenir Programme of May Day Demonstration, May, 2, 1926 (Birmingham, 1926).
3. S.D.I., 5;5;1930; SFTLC minutes, LP EC, 11;2;1930.

4.6 Conclusion

Organisation and propaganda are best considered as essentially second-order phenomena, which is to say that they did not, except in rare cases, determine popular beliefs but that they did, in many cases, reinforce and mobilise them. Their main purpose was, of course, to secure votes and win elections for electoral success and the conquest of political power were the goals by which the orthodox political parties directed and justified their existence.

Judged at the technical level, the Unionist machine in Birmingham was highly successful in precisely these terms. The Unionist bias of the local media and the impressive range and scale of Unionist propaganda powerfully reinforced local sympathies, whilst excellent electoral organisation ensured that support for Unionism was given practical effect where it counted most, in the polling booths. In fact, the sheer magnitude of Unionism's organisational presence was a form of propaganda in itself insofar as it strengthened popular images of the political alternatives available. Unionism had come to appear the 'natural' party of government in Birmingham and both the form and content of its local organisation consolidated its ascendancy.

It was the misfortune of the Labour movement in Birmingham that its weak trades union base and inadequate resources left it particularly ill-equipped to counter an opponent of Unionism's stature. The factors of electoral failure and organisational weakness became mutually reinforcing and together they served for many years to undermine Labour's political credibility and standing in the Midlands city. On the other hand, Labour's partly forced reliance on personal contact and direct persuasion was well attuned to certain mores of the working-class life-style, and by the later 1920s the Party had won a role in the local community that more formal methods of propaganda could not have achieved. At the same time, Labour's

position in national politics was being consolidated and enlarged. The Birmingham Labour movement was gradually able to reach out from the ghetto of its party faithful to a wider mass electorate and many, even in Birmingham, were persuaded that the Party was a genuine and trustworthy contender for power.

The anti-Labour opposition in Sheffield was a far less worthy opponent to a Labour Party which was, in any case, far better placed to secure electoral victory. At the municipal level, the establishment of the Citizens' Alliance was in itself an admission of failure which became a self-fulfilling prophecy. As a marriage of convenience between two previously opposed parties, it could never generate the popular support amongst political activists of the Right to transform its organisational structure into an effective campaigning force. In Birmingham, anti-Labour propaganda was strong because the Unionist Party could point to a genuine local presence and record of achievement; in Sheffield, it sounded weak and hollow because it lacked community resonance and response. The apparent opportunism of the municipal anti-Labour coalition also discredited the two middle-class parties when they stood separately in parliamentary elections.

In strictly organisational terms, the Sheffield Labour movement was little, if any, better placed than its Birmingham counterpart but, because of the many other circumstances favouring Labour's progress, technical means of hastening its electoral advance were not so important. In Birmingham, where countervailing structures of Labour affiliation were particularly needed in order to offset the many local currents upholding the Unionist hegemony, they were lacking. As the Borough Labour Party was honest enough to admit, the local Labour movement had 'grown, generally speaking, not as a result of its organisation, but in spite of it'.[1] In the next section, we examine some of the events and issues of the postwar period which made this possible.

---

1. BBLP minutes, Memorandum on Organisational Proposals submitted to the Organising Committee, 1930.

Chapter 5

THE IMPACT OF NATIONAL POLITICS

5.1 Introduction

In the preceding three sections, we have mapped out a basic terrain of working-class life as it was experienced and assimilated at a local level, examining in particular the ways in which the different forms of work and working-class community interacted with the more directly political influences of organisation and propaganda to create the environment in which ideological loyalties and affiliations were formed. But the working class was part of a national culture and an international economy and, while our analysis is concerned to emphasise the continuing importance of local influences on working-class politics, it is also necessary to assess the impact of national trends and issues. In this section, we analyse the role of some of the major economic and political developments of the 1920s in determining the shape of working-class politics in Birmingham and Sheffield.

5.2 1918-1922: Years of Disillusionment

The General Election held on December, 14, 1918 was the first fought in Britain on a genuinely democratic franchise. The 1918 Representation of the People Act swept away previous disqualifications and inaugurated virtual manhood suffrage for those aged 21 and over. (Discrimination against women, who were not granted the vote if aged under 30 unless property holders in their own right, continued.) The rate of adult male enfranchisement leapt dramatically - in Birmingham, from a pre-war average of 62 per cent to a rate of 99 per cent in 1921; in Sheffield from an average of 58.5 per cent to 99.3 per cent.[1]

The immediate political consequences of the reform were not of a comparable impact, however, owing to the peculiar nature of the 1918 contest. A large part of the franchise extension went to men currently serving in the armed forces who, for various political and administrative reasons, abstained or were unable to vote. At home, the old register and the high rate of removals contributed to an exceptionally low turn-out - in Birmingham, only 48.3 per cent of the qualified electorate voted; in Sheffield, just 47.8 per cent.

Perhaps more important in determining the results than these technical considerations was the political nature of the contest, which was held just four weeks after the conclusion of the Armistice with the intention of cashing in on the short-term popularity of the outgoing Coalition Government. The election was staged as a vote of confidence in the administration which had won the War; Conservatives and Liberals sunk their party differences and united behind the leadership of Lloyd George who now, bathed in the light of victory, appeared as the man whose personal abilities and temperament had done most to bring success. Politicians of all parties scrambled to place themselves behind the banner of the Coalition and there was a pervasive

---

1. H.G.G. Matthew et al., 'The Franchise Factor in the Rise of the Labour Party', English Historical Review, XCI, (October, 1976), p. 728, p. 732.

feeling in the country at large that the nation which had come together through the troubles of war should now stand together to face the problems of peace. In Sheffield, the Lib-Lab trades union leader, Thomas Casey, ran as a Coalition candidate in Attercliffe, while in Birmingham, Eldred Hallas, now of the British Workers' League, formerly an ardent socialist and ILPer, was the duly endorsed Coalition candidate for Duddeston. Hallas' manifesto perhaps sums up the mood of the election better than most:[1]

> Down with Pacifism. Down with Party Politics. Up with the Coalition.
> Peace would have handed us over to the Germans.
> Party politics will hand us over to Chaos, Unemployment and Poverty.
> The COALITION has saved us from Germany and the Coalition CAN and WILL save us from unspeakable distress in the Peace and Reconstruction Period.

The Coalition, then, combined several different appeals in its overall call to the electorate. It played on popular feelings of gratitude and relief at the ending of the War, and it mobilised a general sentiment of goodwill behind the message that things could never be the same again. There was briefly amongst all classes a genuine idealism and a belief that the current moment offered the nation a real opportunity to progress and reform. It was widely recognised, in particular, that the workers, whose lives and labour had done most to win the War, were entitled to better and fairer treatment. Neville Chamberlain, for example, advocated a number of radical reforms in his election address, including shorter working hours, a minimum wage and a comprehensive state-funded house-building programme.[2] In the same spirit, the Sheffield industrialist, Sir Robert Hadfield, urged that:[3]

> The main thing for masters to recognise and act upon is that human labour is not a marketable commodity like a bale of cotton or a ton of pig iron...but rather that the worker is a sentient being with desires that should be recognised, not ignored, with aspirations which should be fostered not crushed.

Another, less savoury, aspect to the Coalition's appeal was the desire for revenge. It was argued that Germany should make full reparations for the

---

1. Birmingham Parliamentary Election Literature, BCL; Duddeston, 1918.
2. Neville Chamberlain Papers, NC5/12/9; 1918 election address, Ladywood.
3. Sheffield Year Book, 1919, p. 39.

costs of the War, for which she was to be held solely responsible, and it was suggested that the Kaiser be tried and punished for his own culpability in the conflict. Sir Herbert Austin, who was standing as the Coalition candidate in King's Norton was typical in his use of the slogan, 'Vote for Austin and help Lloyd George Strafe the Brutal Hun'.[1] Given the suffering and hardships of the previous five years, it would be surprising if such sentiments did not hold some popular resonance.

Labour, by its decision to leave the Coalition and fight the election independently, stood aloof from all this and, although some of its leaders had given whole-hearted support to the War and others had been in radical opposition, it made little difference to the results. The kudos of victory went to Labour's opponents while Labour, popularly identified with a grudging and critical attitude to the War's conduct, if not outright pacifism, was for the time being thoroughly discredited. George Shann, a serving soldier and Labour's candidate in King's Norton, and W.C. Anderson, the leading ILP M.P. and pacifist, standing in Attercliffe, were both convincingly defeated in the Coalition landslide.

But the campaign was not fought, contrary to widespread myth, in an atmosphere of jingoism and vengeful hysteria. It took place in a rather sober and quiet mood and aroused little excitement.[2] According to Austen Chamberlain, everywhere there was 'want of workers, absence of organisation and great apathy'.[3] Labour lost the election primarily because it had distanced itself from the national consensus and, given the popularity and united political strength of its opponents, it lacked credibility as an alternative government. On the other hand, Labour stood far more candidates and won far more votes than ever before, and, owing to the peculiarly unbalanced nature of the new House of Commons, it became the official

---

1. Birmingham Parliamentary Election Literature, BCL; King's Norton, 1918.
2. S.D.I., 16;12;1918. See also, C.L. Mowat, Britain Between the Wars, 1918-1940 (1968), p. 5.
3. Austen Chamberlain Papers, AC5/1/113; Austen to Ida Chamberlain, 8;12;1918

Opposition for the first time. On these grounds, 1918 can be accounted a crucial moment in the Party's national rise to power though at the time the electoral rebuff must have seemed crushing.

The idealism briefly kindled by the allied war victory was rapidly dissipated and forgotten in the years that followed as the realities of Capital and Labour asserted themselves once more. The employers hoped that, now the War was over, the workers would be willing to accept more 'realistic', which is to say less generous, agreements on wages and conditions - a prerequisite, they believed, in the fight to safeguard Britain's premier position in an increasingly competitive international trading environment. In this, they were supported by the 'hard-faced men' who made up the Coalition majority who were themselves often businessmen and industrialists. As for the workers, they were determined to entrench and extend the gains made at a time when their labour was in unique demand. Economic 'realities' which meant lower wages and degraded conditions were treated with hostility and suspicion, all the more so when mouthed by politicians and businessmen who seemed to be doing rather nicely out of the present set-up.

It was reckoned that 34,969,000 working days were lost as a result of industrial action in 1919. Over 2½m. people struck work.[1] If we add to the account those workers in dispute who were not forced into strike action and those indirectly implicated in the grievances of others, there were clearly few groups of workers without some personal experience of the industrial unrest of this period. As employers and the State tried to rescind earlier concessions, they were met by a massive resistance which sought not only to defend these gains but, under the favourable conditions of full employment and heavy demand still obtaining, to enlarge them. The late summer saw industrial relations at their most fraught. There were

---

1. Statistical Abstract for the United Kingdom for each of the fifteen years, 1913 and 1918-1931, Cmd. 4233, (1933), p. 113.

national strikes of railwaymen, moulders, bakers and furniture workers. In Sheffield, these were complemented by local disputes involving the tramwaymen, the Yorkshire miners, Cooperative employees and taxi-drivers; even the funeral attendants withdrew their labour though with less impact on the immediate consumer.[1] In Birmingham, there were strikes by the Dunlops rubber workers and 1000 or so of the local jewellery workforce.[2] And although in the event only 112 officers actually ceased work, Birmingham did rank as one of the chief centres of the national strike called by the National Union of Police and Prison Officers.[3]

A second front, so to speak, of the working-class offensive was opened in the municipal elections of November, 1919 in which Labour made sweeping gains throughout the country. In both Birmingham and Sheffield, Labour outpolled its chief rivals, gaining in the process nine seats and seven seats respectively. The way in which the contemporary wave of strikes could directly influence the results was well illustrated in Neepsend where the Labour candidate, Frank Edwards (himself a moulder currently on strike), made much of national and local government involvement in the recent railway strike.[4] Edwards' candidature, politically and financially backed by the local Cooperative Party, must also have been unusually sympathetically received by the ward's railway-working community as a result of the £650 loan made by the local Brightside and Carbrook Cooperative Society to the railwaymen during their dispute.[5]

The links between the political, industrial and consumerist interests of the working class were rarely so explicit but there is no doubt that the municipal elections were widely viewed as an opportunity to voice a wider working-class resentment against the employers and the administrations which,

---

1. S.D.I., passim; S.D.T., 9;8;1919.
2. Ministry of Labour Gazette, August, October, 1919.
3. R. Shackleton, 'The 1919 Police Strike in Birmingham' in A. Wright, R. Shackleton (eds), Worlds of Labour: Essays in Birmingham Labour History (Birmingham, 1983), p. 72.
4. S.D.I., 3;11;1919.
5. ASLEF no. 1 minutes, 19;10;1919.

both at a national and local level, seemed to be ruling in the employers' interests. The Government's betrayal of apparent promises to nationalise the mines and its attempts to cut wages on the railways seemed indicative of a general bias against working-class aspirations and helped spread a powerful disillusionment with the Coalition amongst its erstwhile working-class sympathisers. The resignation of Eldred Hallas from the National Democratic Party and his decision to take the Labour whip were examples of a wider process by which working-class support was going over to Labour.[1] The Labour Party, free of the Coalition taint, secure in its trades union affiliations, now began to appear the more trustworthy means of defending working-class interests.

The first half of 1920 continued with a similar pattern of industrial and political militancy. In Sheffield, there were strikes in the cutlery and tool, iron and steel, and building trades; in Birmingham, car workers, brassworkers and gunmakers struck work.[2] Political militancy reached its height in August when national protests, coordinated by the Labour Party, against the Coalition's aid to the anti-Soviet forces in Poland, seem to have been at least partly influential in persuading the Government to change tack. But as economic conditions slumped, the latter part of the year marked the beginning of a period of working-class retreat. As unemployment rose and profits fell, the employers' counter-attack was resumed with a vengeance and whereas most earlier industrial action had been waged in order to wrest improvements in rates and conditions, it now became primarily defensive.

One exception to this was the national miners' strike in October, called in furtherance of a claim for a wages increase. Amongst the Yorkshire miners, whose resources were already severely strained by earlier

---

1. Monthly Journal of the Amalgamated Society of Gas, Municipal and General Workers, October, 1919.
2. Ministry of Labour Gazette, 1920.

actions, it was an unpopular strike motivated partly, they believed, by political considerations.[1] Amongst the wider working class, there was even less sympathy for the miners' strike which, by the severe industrial disruption it brought in its wake, added to the many hardships already being suffered by workers in the grips of economic depression. The miners' action could easily be seen as selfish and destructive and was readily portrayed as such by Labour's enemies. This time, the annual municipal elections saw the Labour vote fall and the Party lose seats (four in Birmingham, one in Sheffield). The miners' strike was certainly one factor in this rebuff.[2] Another, more diffuse but probably equally potent, was a general sense in which the reverses suffered since mid-1920 had shattered the self-confidence of the working class and temporarily put an end to hopes of industrial or political advancement. The retreat from Labour politics was just one facet of the air of disillusionment and defeat which hung over the working class at this time.

Conversely, the even greater attack on working-class conditions in 1921 had the effect of reviving Labour's fortunes. The political impact of the massive unemployment of this year has already been examined and should bear the brunt of any explanation of Labour's electoral successes. However, it was far from inevitable that the Opposition should benefit from the economic crisis; for this to happen, it was necessary that political blame for the crisis be attached to those in power.

That such blame was ascribed to the Coalition Government was well illustrated by the very different popular impact of the national coal strike of this year. On this occasion, the miners' strike was essentially defensive in nature, sparked by the ending of Government control and subsidies on April, 1st. and the simultaneous introduction by the coal owners of new reduced

---

1. R.G. Neville, 'The Yorkshire Miners, 1881-1926: A Study in Labour and Social History', Ph. D. thesis, University of Leeds, 1974, pp. 575-76, p. 583.
2. BBLP minutes, 8;11;1920.

rates. The miners resisted for 90 days and were then forced back on terms which, by their inclusion of wage cuts and the principle of district settlements, represented a crushing defeat. This time, there was no doubt among working people that the miners were more to be pitied than blamed. They were readily identifiable as the common victims of a Government and an employing class acting in apparent concert to impoverish working-class conditions. The Sheffield Trades and Labour Council put the issue in unusually forthright and ideological terms but it was undeniably voicing a widespread sentiment:[1]

> The lockout of the miners was...the first round in the fight which Capitalism was commencing in order to crush and starve the workers below the 1914 level...We never wavered from the opinion that the miners were fighting a battle which would affect the wages and conditions of every worker in the country.

Events in the remaining part of the year seemed to confirm the truth of this analysis. There was barely a single group of workers who did not suffer some degradation of rates and working practice. In the month of November alone, wage cuts were announced affecting seventeen occupational groups in Birmingham and nine in Sheffield; not one of the major employing sectors was without some experience of reductions.[2]

Strikes remained one means of working-class resistance but they were costly and arduous to wage and, during a time of recession, rarely effective. Another means, unproblematically available and apparently increasingly necessary, was the ballot box. Six Labour gains in both Birmingham and Sheffield in the November municipal elections were an eloquent testimony to a range and depth of working-class anger, prevented expression in other forms, finding outlet in support of the one major party not implicated in the betrayal of wartime promises and hopes.

1922 saw the culmination of the post-war process by which victory was turned into defeat for a large section of the British population. Politically,

---

1. SFTLC, Annual Report, 1922, p. 8.
2. Ministry of Labour Gazette, December, 1921.

the Government continued to alienate working-class support by its ruthless pursuit of economy, manifested particularly in the spending cuts made by the 'Geddes axe' in health and education. Industrially, the year was marked by further unemployment and dispute, most notably in the engineering lock-out which commenced on March, 11, and finally ended in the division and defeat of the industry's workers on June, 14. The defeat of the engineers was given particular resonance by the fact that the dispute had revolved around a point of principle - the right of the working man to have some control over his own working conditions - rather than mere wages and hours. The victory of the engineering employers sounded the death knell of any lingering ideals of co-partnership and industrial cooperation and reasserted the reality of the class divide in British industry.

In the meantime, important events were taking place in the political arena with the Conservatives' decision to withdraw from the Coalition taken at the famous Carlton Club meeting on October, 15. In practice, however, the move had no marked effect in either Birmingham or Sheffield. In Birmingham, the power and electoral successes of Unionism had long reduced the role of independent Liberalism to insignificant proportions. In Sheffield, whose Liberal traditions were stronger and more recent, Liberalism's eclipse was a more contemporary phenomenon. In 1918, four of the victorious Coalition candidates in the city had been Liberals. In 1922, all four stood as National Liberals (that is, as supporters of Lloyd George and the Coalition) with no opposition from the local Conservatives. Indeed, in Brightside the candidature of Tudor Walters was fully endorsed and practically supported by the divisional Conservative Association.[1] Superficially seeming to represent some degree of political success for the Liberals, these arrangements in fact illustrated the extent to which Liberalism and Conservatism had become synonymous in Sheffield. At the municipal level, the anti-Labour coalition which had ruled the city since

---

1. Brightside Conservative Association minutes, 4;11;1922.

1919 had virtually assured the identity of the two old parties in most eyes. To many in the working class, the Liberal Party had come to seem at best irrelevant, at worst antagonistic, to the pursuit of working-class interests. Unable to hold on to its working-class constituency, Liberalism in Sheffield, had sought to maintain its electoral support in alliance with Conservatism - a strategy which alienated yet further the Party's lingering support among the working classes whilst rendering ineffectual any political opposition that Liberalism could mobilise against its old enemy.

The Labour Party, on the other hand, whatever the real or imagined inadequacies of its class analysis, was undeniably a working-class party which put working-class interests in the forefront of its propaganda. In the peculiar circumstances of the post-war era, when both the old parties almost appeared to be in a conspiracy to debase working-class conditions, this in itself was a significant point in its favour. Labour stood free of the morass of Coalition politics and aligned itself radically with those who felt betrayed or victimised by the Government of Lloyd George and the rule of the middle-class parties.

In the municipal elections of 1922, Labour outpolled the Sheffield Citizens' Association for the first time since 1919. In the General Election held two weeks later, Labour gained Attercliffe, Brightside and Hillsborough, defeating in each case a National Liberal. In Park, the sitting Liberal retained his seat by less than 1000 votes. In Birmingham, the Labour Party had a considerable way to go before it could claim a comparable mandate but the municipal election results - in which the Party came within 951 votes of the Unionist total - and the parliamentary results - in which Labour almost doubled its vote from the 1918 figure - must have given the Party's supporters some grounds for hope.

5.3 1923-1925: The First Labour Government

The Conservative administration which took office in October, 1922 succeeded to a situation where economic conditions were stabilising, where the industrial workforce was quiescent and where, at last, things seemed to be returning to some kind of normality. Conservative politicians breathed a sigh of relief and avoided for the most part any political adventures.

It was Neville Chamberlain, who had become Minister of Health in March, 1923 who provided at least a partial exception to this observation however. Chamberlain's Rent Restrictions Act maintained rent control but also gave landlords increased opportunities to raise rents and evict tenants. It was not quite, as Labour propagandists claimed, a 'Landlords' Charter' but it did undoubtedly diminish the protection previously enjoyed by working-class tenants in privately-rented accommodation. Chamberlain's 1923 Housing Act had the laudable aim of stimulating house-building which had been at a virtual halt since the Coalition Government's axing of the Addison scheme. But it did so in a way which, by its preferential treatment of private house-builders and its encouragement of local authority provision of smaller, 'non-parlour' homes, seemed to discriminate against the working class.[1]

Both Acts were to lose the Conservatives some popular support and Chamberlain himself rapidly realised the extent to which his Rent Act had become a political liability. He sought vainly to offset some of its adverse impact on his working-class constituents by privately subsidising a local solicitor to represent them in cases brought under the Act in Birmingham but the measure was, as we shall see, one that continued to bedevil the Unionist cause in the city for several years to come.[2]

In October, 1923, Stanley Baldwin, who had taken over the premiership on the resignation of Bonar Law in May, announced his support for the

---

1. A.J.P. Taylor, English History, 1914-1945 (1965), p. 206.
2. Neville Chamberlain Papers, NC5/10/16; Chamberlain to A.F. Lovett, 8;3;1924.

protection of the home market. This necessitated the calling of a new election for Bonar Law had earlier given an undertaking not to introduce any measures of tariff reform without a clear popular mandate. In the General Election held on December, 6, the Conservatives sought such a mandate while Labour and Liberals opposed them in a rigid adherence to the principles of Free Trade. This was the chance that the Unionists of Birmingham, following in the footsteps of Joseph Chamberlain and committed as a man to tariff reform, had been waiting for. They fought wholeheartedly on the issue, waging their campaign around such deceptively attractive slogans as:[1]

> Be British! Liberals and Labour-Socialists propose to employ foreigners and tax you!
> Conservatives and Unionists propose to employ you and tax the foreigner!

Such sentiments clearly had some appeal to parts of the Birmingham working class, particularly those in the depressed traditional trades hardest hit by foreign competition. A parallel situation existed in Sheffield where the Conservative candidates in Park and Central Divisions made much of the utility of the tariff against unfair German competition in the cutlery trade. The Labour reply was confused for, while attacking the Protection-Free Trade argument as essentially diversionary and irrelevant, they nevertheless made the defence of Free Trade the chief plank of their platform. More particularly, they hammered home the message that Protection would mean dearer food.[2]

In the event, Labour's vote as a proportion of the poll was virtually static in Birmingham whilst that of the Unionists rose by three per cent. Labour had held its own but there was no doubt that Protection was a cause that continued to exercise the mind of the Birmingham working class.[3] The propaganda of Joseph Chamberlain and his sons and followers and the impact of the depression in the city's old staple trades ensured that the issue

---

1. Birmingham Parliamentary Election Literature, BCL; King's Norton, 1923.
2. J. Barnes, D. Nicholson (eds), The Leo Amery Diaries; vol. 1, 1896-1929 (1980), p. 356.
3. T.C., 7;12;1923.

retained some popular resonance. In Sheffield, too, the Labour vote declined proportionately and, though the seats gained in the previous year remained safe, hopes that Central and Park Divisions would fall to Labour were disappointed. The attraction of the tariff to some of the craft trades' workers was a factor in the Conservative successes; in Park, in particular, the result, in which the sitting Liberal M.P., who had recently announced his conversion to Asquithian, Free Trade Liberalism, was returned at the bottom of the poll indicates that Protection was a popular cause.[1]

The General Election of 1923, which was otherwise unremarkable, did have one significant effect - it led to the assumption of office of the first Labour Government. Though the Conservatives remained the largest single party, they were outnumbered in the Commons by a Free Trade majority in which Labour had the largest share. When Baldwin was defeated in a Commons vote in January, 1924, Ramsay MacDonald was asked, and agreed, to form a Labour administration.

The actual work of the Labour Government may be passed over fairly rapidly. It boasted few major achievements though the Housing Act of John Wheatley, Snowden's Free Trade budget and MacDonald's shrewd and diplomatic handling of foreign affairs might be accounted popular successes. Probably more important in working-class eyes was the style of government: Labour had ruled with dignity and responsibility and had laid to rest the old bogy of its unfitness for office. The biggest blot on the Labour record, at least so far as its right-wing opponents were concerned, seemed to lie in its dealings with the Communists. Recognition of the Soviet Union and, more particularly, the agreement by which Britain made a loan to Russia in return for guaranteed sales were portrayed as unpatriotic and servile moves in support of a murderous and unfriendly power. The actual incident which occasioned Labour's fall - the abandonment of the prosecution for sedition

---

1. The Times, 4;12;1923.

of the editor of the Communist Workers' Weekly - was adduced as further evidence of Labour's 'softness' on, or covert sympathy for, Communism.

The wave of anti-Red propaganda which these actions had unleashed reached its climax four days before the election with the publication of the Zinoviev Letter, a document purporting to be from the Russian president of Comintern ordering subversion in Britain. Whatever the doubts about its authenticity, in the short term it undoubtedly provided an opportunity to push the Red bogy. 'Bolshevik Attempt to Ruin Britain! The Russian Reds Call for Revolution! British Foreign Office Exposes Malignant Plot!', screamed a handbill issued by the Unionist candidate in Yardley.[1]

However, despite and maybe even because of these crude attempts to discredit Labour, the Party's vote increased by about six per cent in both Birmingham and Sheffield. The support of Labour's working-class sympathisers had been in no way weakened by its tenure of office which, given the Government's minority position, seemed quite worthy, and they felt little of the anti-Red paranoia which could be used to whip up a right-wing backlash among the middle classes. The real losers were the Liberals whose three representatives in Birmingham received insignificant votes and who in Sheffield had been unable to field a single candidate. Their role appeared irrelevant to the middle classes when the real issue was perceived as being between Communism and Constitutionalism.

Working-class voters were more down-to-earth and their increasing distrust of Conservatism was fortified by the actual operation of several earlier acts of Conservative legislation. Chief among these, and with particular political impact in Birmingham, was Chamberlain's 1923 Rent Act which was ruthlessly exploited by Unionism's opponents, and the Labour candidate in Ladywood especially, as evidence of the Party's callous disregard for working-class interests. With regard to Ladywood, the

---

1. Birmingham Parliamentary Election Literature, BCL; Yardley, 1924.

Unionists conceded that:[1]

> the effect of the Rent Act in that particular Division was deadly. There were actual instances there of people having their rent increased, and also of losing their houses under the operation of the Act.

Chamberlain won by just 77 votes after a dubious recount. His opponent, Oswald Mosley, summed up the contest and the result in the vituperative rhetoric that he commanded so easily:[2]

> A downpour of rain and hundreds of motor cars enabled the Unionist candidate to scrape home and the lifeless body of the last of the Chamberlains had been washed back to Westminster. The Labour campaign of six weeks had killed a tradition of sixty years, and the Chamberlain majority fell to vanishing point. Birmingham had said they no longer wanted a name but something greater than a name.

Mosley's oratory was, as usual, overblown but there could be no doubts that the citadel of Unionism was crumbling at its very centre. On the periphery, it was already falling for, in King's Norton, Labour had won its first ever seat in Birmingham when Robert Dennison defeated the sitting Unionist, Sir Herbert Austin. Dennison's campaign, boosted by some 700 active workers, focussed on Austin's personal record - he had voted in only one in three parliamentary divisions - and Dennison's slogan, 'Sack the Boss', must have seemed apt to the local workers.The fact that the car industry was reviving despite the repeal of the McKenna duties and, once more, the local workings of Chamberlain's Rent Act were also played up to considerable effect.[3]

In Sheffield, where Labour already stood in a stronger position, there was no dramatic breakthrough though in Central the Conservative majority was reduced to just 305 and victory secured only through the solid Tory voting of the 800 or so plural voters with business premises in the Division.[4]

Despite these local successes for Labour, Baldwin once more commanded an overall majority in Parliament and he set about forming a new administration in which men from Birmingham played a prominent part.

---

1. BUA minutes, 26;11;1924.
2. B.P., 3;11;1924.
3. Man and Metal, November, 1924.
4. S.F., December, 1924.

Neville Chamberlain was again made Minister of Health, Austen Chamberlain became Foreign Secretary, Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland was named Minister of Labour and L.C.M.S. Amery, Colonial Secretary.

No pressing problems seemed to threaten the stability and political strength of the new Government but, as usual, trouble was brewing in the coal industry. In June, 1925, the owners gave one month's notice of their intention to end the current wages agreement and introduce sharply reduced rates of remuneration. The trades union movement mobilised in opposition and on June, 30th. the Government intervened to prevent industrial action through its announcement of a nine months' subsidy to maintain wages and profits and the establishment of a Royal Commission to investigate means of making the industry more efficient and remunerative. The Labour movement celebrated the victory apparently represented by Red Friday but, nine months later, it was to face the same problems and a far better prepared government.

5.4 1926: The General Strike

The General Strike of 1926 was an event which, more than any other in the interwar period, established the class allegiances and illustrated the reality of the class divisions in British society. It was a conflict, fuelled on both sides by feelings of class sentiment, which broke down the conventional industrial-political divide which usually operated to deradicalise popular consciousness and placed the major issues of British politics along indisputably class-determined lines. The miners' dispute, which caused the General Strike and continued long after it was called off, had an equal if not greater impact. The misgivings, widely felt and skilfully exploited, on the alleged constitutional impropriety of the larger action did not apply here. The miners were manifestly the underdogs and their struggle, waged amidst great hardship and against almost impossible odds, to protect a way of life and standard of living already considerably degraded attracted widespread public support and sympathy.

It is not our purpose here to give more than summary accounts of the conduct of these disputes in Birmingham and Sheffield for which full details may be found elsewhere.[1] Rather, we set out to explore the way in which the disputes influenced the evolving patterns of working-class consciousness and politics. It will be contended that 1926 was a crucial moment in the rise of Labour; this section is concerned to suggest how and why it came to play this role.

---

1. For Birmingham, see:
R.P. Hastings, 'Aspects of the General Strike in Birmingham, 1926', Midlands History, II, 4, (1974),
R.P. Hastings, 'Birmingham' in J. Skelley (ed.), The General Strike, 1926 (1976).
Birmingham Public Libraries, The Nine Days in Birmingham (Birmingham, 1976)
For Sheffield, see:
S. Benton, 'Sheffield' in M. Morris (ed.) The General Strike (Harmondsworth, 1976),
Holberry Society, General Strike in Sheffield. Documents of the Strike with an Introduction by Bill Moore (Sheffield, 1981),
J.H. Copley, 'The General Strike in South Yorkshire', M.A. thesis, University of Sheffield, 1972,
J.A. Peck, The Miners' Strike in South Yorkshire, 1926 (Sheffield, 1970).

The General Strike was not in fact, nor was it intended to be, general. The strategy of the TUC depended on the withdrawal of key groups of workers in a series of waves: transport, print, building, metal and chemical workers were called out in the first wave on May, 3rd.; engineering, shipbuilding and power workers were ordered to cease work on May, 12th. In consequence, it is estimated in Birmingham that, out of a total workforce of approximately 445,000, only 20,000 to 30,000 workers participated directly and willingly in the Strike.[1] It was, nevertheless, a great success for the local trades union movement. All those called out responded solidly and vigorously to the call and others were eager to support the action. On May, 5, the Trade Union Emergency Committee set up to oversee the local operation of the dispute, could report:[2]

> Everything in Birmingham in regard to the stoppage is proceeding satisfactorily. The extent of the stoppage is much greater than anybody anticipated and all road, passenger and carrying traffic, both trams and buses, has been stopped.
> Commercial road transport has, in practically all cases, responded loyally to the cause. On the railways the stoppage is complete. Traffic locally and clerical staffs have unanimously answered the call. In the factories the difficulty is to keep people at work; all are anxious to be out and in the fight.

We can forgive a little exaggeration born out of the buoyancy of the moment in order to savour the mood. During its long years of struggle in extremely adverse conditions, the Birmingham trades union movement had won few battle honours. Of course, there had been strikes and labour unrest but generally their scale and impact had been dissipated by the class collaborationism which pervaded local industrial relations and politics. Most recently, the engineering lock-out had been a humiliating demonstration of trades unionism's impotence in this, one of Britain's major manufacturing centres. Now, in 1926, the unions were fighting a popular cause, widely supported by local trades unionists, in which, briefly, they seemed to hold the upper hand.

---

1. Hastings, op. cit. (1974), p. 258.
2. Birmingham Trade Union Emergency Committee minutes, 5;5;1926.

To this extent, therefore, the Trade Union Emergency Committee was justified in describing the Strike in Birmingham as 'a magnificent demonstration by the workers of their power and a lesson to the Government and employing classes'.[1] The trades unionists of Birmingham, with some wider working-class support, had acted together and in concert with the national Labour movement to display solidarity with the struggle of their fellow workers. It was class sentiment rather than a highly politicised class consciousness which united the trades unionists of Birmingham with the miners' cause but even as such it represented a sharp break with a tradition of cross-class politics that was becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. As John Strachey explained, the strike call was initially greeted with some trepidation in Birmingham:[2]

> a city where Trade Union organisation was at least ten years behind the best organised areas, in which 50 per cent of the workers have habitually voted Conservative.../But/ as everywhere else the railwaymen, the tramwaymen and printers, and other affected trades came out with virtual unanimity. The engineers were discontented because they had not been summoned. For the first time the Birmingham workers acted as a class.

Sheffield was already renowned as a storm centre of industrial militancy and it was inevitably drawn into the front line of the dispute for, as well as containing around 9000 miners, the city also possessed a large concentration of those industries most dependent on the coal industry and those workers called out by the TUC in the first wave. The fact that Sheffield's engineers were currently engaged in their own bitter wages struggle added even greater immediacy and militancy to the local conduct of the Strike.[3] In all, probably some 50,000 workers (over one fifth of the city's workforce) struck work - a total made up most importantly of the 9000 mineworkers themselves, 8000 iron and steel workers, 7000 engineers, 5000 cutlers, 3500 railway workers, and 3000 public transport workers.[4]

---

1. BTC minutes, 18;5;1926.
2. T.C., 18;6;1926. Emphasis in original.
3. Benton, op. cit., p. 428.
4. Copley, op. cit., p. 49.

In Sheffield too, the Strike was a massive demonstration of working people's support for the miners' cause, aptly summed up in its conduct and conclusion by the closing report of the Trades and Labour Council's Central Disputes Committee:[1]

> The morale of the workmen concerned in the City was exceptional throughout the entire period, our chief difficulty here being, not to get the men out who had been instructed to cease, but to keep those at work whom the General Council desired should for the time being remain...
> /W/hat has been proven to be the most magnificent display of working-class solidarity in support of a principle was to a large degree marred by the eagerness with which the Strike was ended, without consideration for the miners' cause, and without adequate provision being made for all to return.

While the General Strike was called off by the TUC on the pretext of concessions which proved illusory, the miners continued the fight for a further seven months. In South Yorkshire, one of the last three areas to return to work, it was not until November, 29th. that the coal owners and miners were able to agree terms and so bring an end to the dispute which had lasted 222 days.[2] Throughout this period, the coal-dependent economy of Sheffield was devastated by the lack of one of its basic raw materials, and the widespread unemployment and short-time that ensued were an ample reminder to the local working class of the coal dispute and the industrial and political forces which were perpetuating the suffering of the miners and their own discomforts. Birmingham was hit less severely but it too suffered considerable economic disruption as a result of the upheavals of the coal industry.

The miners' struggle, both in its own right and in the impact it was having on a wider public, remained the most salient issue in popular political consciousness for the rest of the year. The undoubted widespread sympathy for the miners existed on two levels. Firstly, there was a common belief, given considerable plausibility by the public statements of many

---

1. SFTLC minutes, Report of the Central Disputes Committee, 1926.
2. S.D.I., 30;11;1926.

industrialists and middle-class politicians, that the attack on the miners was part of a more general move to reduce workers' wages throughout industry as a whole. It was reported in Erdington, for example, that there existed:[1]

> a feeling through most of the shops that if the miners were beaten, it will be the thin end of the wedge for reducing wages in all industries throughout the country.

But there was also a simple human compassion for the mineworkers and their families in the privations which the uneven contest had imposed. Such sentiments operated across the class spectrum but were given additional impact in the working class in particular by the insouciance of the Government and its apparently wilful failure to bring the dispute to a satisfactory conclusion. Even in its inaction, the Government appeared to be siding with the coal owners against the embattled miners, a position which jarred with many whose political affiliations might otherwise have led them to support the economic case by which the Government justified its role.

These were attitudes which the Labour Party could legitimately exploit. A municipal by-election in Ladywood in June, 1926 was turned into a virtual referendum on the Government's handling of the dispute. House-to-house collections to relieve distress in the coalfields were made both for the practical aid they could render and to point the moral of the Baldwin administration's callousness.[2] At the same time, the Unionists of Birmingham were forced to abandon any attempt to canvass the electorate personally as a result of 'violent Labour opposition'.[3] Such popular antipathy to Conservatism was not unusual in the summer of 1926. In Erdington, the Unionists did not try to hold their usual open-air meetings:[4]

> People are not in the frame of mind to listen to reason when they had been forced to support their families on something under 30/- per week and that is the condition of things in many parts of the Division today.

---

1. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/118/3; Dallas to Steel-Maitland, 5;5;1926.
2. The Times, 9;6;1926.
3. Ladywood Ward Women's Unionist Association minutes, 14;7;1926.
4. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/118/3; Dallas to Steel-Maitland, 29;7;1926.

It is noteworthy that, despite these severe industrial difficulties, the working class in both Birmingham and Sheffield responded with considerable generosity to the fund-raising efforts of the local Labour movements on behalf of the miners and their dependents. In Birmingham, trades union and Labour Party activity raised almost £5200 and over 200 children from the hardest-hit areas were given temporary homes with local sympathisers.[1] Even in Sheffield, itself the victim of considerable distress, £1692 was raised for the miners' cause by the Trades and Labour Council.[2] Significantly, such practical suppport came not only from those previously sympathetic to Labour's arguments but from some who had hitherto been antipathetic or apolitical. The Penworkers' Federation showed its solidarity with the miners by a £100 donation to the South Staffordshire Miners' Relief Fund and the Bedstead Workers' Association made a grant of £500 to the MFGB.[3]

Whatever the emotions behind popular support for the miners, and they were various, it was the Labour Party who stood to be their principal political beneficiary. The Conservative Government's apparent sympathy for the coal owners discredited it in working-class eyes and Labour stood out as the major force arguing for a more rational and humane solution to the problems of the mineworking communities. Labour also offered a political response to the economic vicissitudes currently being experienced by working people at a time when industrial action had been nullified as a means of working-class resistance.

The Ladywood by-election, which had been the first real test for the Conservative Party, resulted in the overturning of a Unionist majority of 145 to give Labour victory by a margin of 1146 votes.[4] Three months later, in September, 1926, the neighbouring ward of Rotton Park was the scene of a further municipal by-election. Political excitement was still at fever pitch,

---

1. BTC General Strike Collection, vol. 2; 'What Birmingham Has Done for the Miners', N.D.
2. SFTLC Annual Report, 1926.
3. Penworkers' Federation minutes, 3;6;1926; BWA minutes, 18;8;1926.
4. The Times, 9;6;1926.

three to five meetings were addressed each night during the campaign, and Labour was on the offensive. In the exhilaration of victory (another Labour gain from Unionism), the Labour candidate, W.H. Milner, proclaimed:[1]

> We fought on out-and-out socialism and the workers responded. They showed in unmistakeable fashion their resentment at the attempts of the boss class, backed by the Tory Government, to reduce them to abject servitude.

This was to go too far but there is no doubt that the Conservative Government's mishandling of the coal dispute and the acute symbolism of the miners' uneven contest created a situation where Labour's usual attacks on the depredations and injustices of the capitalist system had an unusually wide and deep resonance. For once, Labour did not need to mute its critique of the prevailing system because the system stood condemned by its own practice.

In the city-wide round of elections that took place in November, the Birmingham Labour Party surpassed the total Unionist poll by over 11,000 votes and gained eight seats. And while the chief contestants could agree on little else, they were in accord that the coal dispute had played a dominant role in the campaign. There were many unemployed or on short-time in the city and the high price of coal was hitting the poorest sections of the community. The results proved, concluded the Unionists, that:[2]

> these people definitely, though mistakenly, blame the Unionist Government for this state of affairs and consider the strike could have been settled by the Government had there been a real wish to do so.

The Trade Council concurred insofar as it ascribed the results to the people's 'complete disgust with the Government's open support for the mine-owners' policy of starving the miners back to work', but it clearly placed a rather different ideological slant on its interpretation.[3] In fact, it was the strength of the Labour case in this situation that both industrial and political resentments, personal concerns and class sentiments could combine within the political and class ideology espoused by the Labour Party in its opposition to the Conservative Government and its economic philosophy.

---

1. T.C., 3;9;1926.
2. BUA minutes, 17;11;1926.
3. BTC Annual Report, 1926-1927, p.13.

In Sheffield, the results were even more dramatic for it was the municipal elections of 1926 which gave Labour control of the City Council for the first time. Labour gained an absolute majority of votes cast and six seats in the elections of November, 1st. and became the largest party. It consolidated its position by the appointment of seven Labour aldermen and eight Labour victories (including one additional gain) in the ensuing by-elections. Again, though there were local issues which emphasised and complemented the chief disagreements of the contending parties, it was agreed that it was the mining dispute which aroused the fiercest passions - not surprisingly given its immediate and local impact. Both Labour and Citizens' candidates concluded that the electorate had taken the opportunity to express its dissatisfaction with the policy of the Baldwin Government though the Labour councillors claimed their victories were a protest against Baldwin's biassed handling of the coal dispute while their vanquished opponents were readier to put the blame simply on the material deprivations being suffered by the local working class. The defeated Citizens' Alliance candidate in St. Philip's explained the result starkly but eloquently with the statement that 'there are people in St. Philip's not getting as much food as they would like'.[1] This was true but nor was it unknown; the difference in this instance was that the working class had an obvious figure to blame. They plainly felt that their suffering was not inevitable but had direct human causes. Voting Labour seemed to offer at least a partial hope that these causes would be removed.

---

1. S.D.I., 2;11;1926.

5.5 1927-1929: Baldwin's Downfall

Any hopes that Baldwin may have entertained that the Government's treatment of the General Strike and mining dispute would be forgiven and forgotten in the years to follow were not to be fulfilled. Class consciousness was not a one-sided phenomenon and there were many in the Conservative Party who believed that the time was ripe to extract some political revenge on the Labour movement for its imprudent behaviour in 1926. In May, 1927, the Government introduced the Trade Disputes Bill which outlawed sympathetic strikes and strikes intended to coerce the government, forbade civil service unions to affiliate to the TUC or Labour Party, and laid it down that henceforth trades unionists who wished to contribute financially to the Labour Party had to contract in.

The Bill was widely viewed as a class measure, taking advantage of an already weakened opposition and crudely calculated to secure political benefit for the Conservative Party. Even among some Conservatives there was a recognition that the Bill was ill-conceived; in a discussion at the Erdington Conservative Club:[1]

> opinions were expressed that the Bill was in some forms a Class Bill; and that it was out to crush the Trade Unions although the employer will be in a much stronger position, and that it was the wrong time to bring out such a bill.

To many in the working class, it strengthened the impression that the Baldwin Government was ruling principally in the interests of the employers and capitalists by its apparent intention to weaken yet further an already debilitated trades unionism. The Bill antagonised working-class opinion and, if any political advantage was created, it accrued mainly to the Labour Party. The Chief Conciliation Officer in Birmingham described local reaction to the proposed legislation in his report to the Ministry of Labour:[2]

> Suggestions of legislation against the Trade Unions give politics and politicians a larger place than usual in industrial circles.

---

1. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/118/3; Beardmore to Steel-Maitland, 12;4;1927
2. LAB 10/5, PRO; Trade Union reactions to proposed Trade Union legislation. Report of Chief Conciliation Officer, Birmingham, 13;1;1927.

> The indications are that any legislation will be held up as a political move in the employers' interests and will be so regarded by the bulk of Trade Union branches and members.
> The opinions seem to be held fairly generally that if the Government do amend the law relating to the trade unions...both the political and industrial Labour movements will be strengthened in proportion to the extent of the changes made.
> The unions are not penitent; there is no change of heart, no goodwill; just exhaustion...In /the/ mind of /the/ average trade unionist the Government, coalowners and employers generally are lumped together as "they".

That this should be so in Birmingham, the city where middle-class politicians and industrialists had been the most successful of any in the country in converting the working class to the benefits of political and economic class cooperation, was of especial significance. In Sheffield, whose militant traditions had frequently put the working class in opposition to their rulers, such attitudes did not seem so remarkable but, even here, there is little doubt that the Conservative Government of 1924 to 1929 had succeeded in alienating such working-class support as the Party had hitherto possessed. A correspondent from Brightside reported that among the local miners 'there is a desperate feeling of hatred and the very name of Baldwin is as poison'.[1] But working-class antipathy to the Prime Minister was also spread more widely:[2]

> Electors who have been known to be strong Conservatives have left the defence of their policy severely alone, and do not attempt to even discuss in public as they previously did. There does seem to be a very definite wave against Baldwin and his Party.

Throughout the period of the miners' strike and its aftermath, the Conservatives acted with a political ineptitude and an apparent incomprehension of working-class sentiment which did much to contribute to their electoral downfall in 1929. Even during the 1929 General Election campaign, they revived the mining issue with a Central Office leaflet urging working-class voters to remember the General Strike. They did - and the Conservatives lost votes as a result because, so far as the majority of working people were concerned, it was the Conservative Party and Conservative

---

1. Ponsonby Papers, Ms Eng Hist c670; C.J. Richardson to Ponsonby, N.D.
2. ibid.

policy which were to blame for that unfortunate episode.[1]

A number of other Tory enactments in the years before 1929 individually aggravated working-class support and contributed in total to a widespread view of the Baldwin Government as insensitive and antagonistic to working-class concerns. The derating of industry and agriculture in 1928 was one such. It must have seemed as if the poorer rate-payers were being asked to subsidise the corporations and the land-owners, an appraisal which became all the more persuasive when the reassessments which were carried out at the same time led to extensive increases in working-class rates demands. 'Derating was certainly not understood' and lost the Conservatives votes.[2] The reductions in milk allowances for nursing mothers, the anomalies and omissions in the Widows' Pensions and Old Age Pensions Acts and the reduction in unemployment benefit all had the same effect.[3] The general suspicion of the Tory administration came to be such that it was widely held culpable for failings in which it was blameless. E.R. Canning, the chairman of the West Birmingham Unionist Association, bemoaned the fact that:[4]

> even the tea duty remission did us no good because our ignorant voters put the heavy rise in bacon down to our Party and were so told by the Labour canvassers!

In Erdington, Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland had particular problems owing to his role as Minister of Labour. A charge made by the periodical John Bull that he had abused public funds subscribed to relieve distress in the mining communities by using them to subsidise colliery owners employing miners at below the legal minimum wage was given wide publicity.[5] The truth - that the funds were being used to pay for an apprenticeship scheme for young miners - was less reprehensible but came too late to save his seat and would perhaps have made little difference even if it had been more extensively known. It was an exaggeration to claim - as his wife did - that 'a Minister

---

1. BUA, Letters relating to West Birmingham Constituency, 1922-1937; West Birmingham Election, Chairman's Report, /1929/.
2. ibid.; The Times, 30;5;1929.
3. BUA minutes, 14;6;1929; BUA, Letters relating to West Birmingham, 1922-1937; West Birmingham Election, Chairman's Report.
4. BUA, Letters relating to West Birmingham Constituency..Chairman's Report.
5. Simmons Papers, vol. 2; Labour Party leaflet, Erdington election, 1929.

of Labour always loses his seat', but it was certainly the case that Steel-Maitland was especially vulnerable to the widespread dissatisfactions almost inevitably caused by the working of the State system of benefits.[1]

By 1929, all these many and various complaints and disgruntlements had come together in a general and pervasive feeling that the time was ripe for change and that the Labour Party should be given the opportunity to put some of its policies and promises into action. In his diary entry explaining the reasons for the Conservatives' defeat, Neville Chamberlain's 'feel' for the realities of mass politics is persuasive even though he seems to underestimate the part played by the Conservatives in their own downfall. Labour's victory, he argued, was due:[2]

> to the ceasless propaganda that has been going on for years among the working classes that things would never be right for them till a "Labour" Govt *[sic]* came in. Every grievance has been exploited to point this moral - people who have not got pensions, people who have had their assessments raised, people who could not get a municipal house, people whose wages were low or who were unemployed, or were excluded from benefit, etc., etc. - all these were told this is what you must expect so long as you have a capitalist Government. And though they hardly expect the millenium they have said: well, let us give these fellows a chance. Something is wrong, the present Govt *[sic]* haven't put it right, the other side say they would have righted it. Let us see if they can do something for us. There is no conversion to Socialism. It is merely the present discontents showing themselves in a desire for change.

While Chamberlain is correct in suggesting that the 'desire for change' manifested in the 1929 General Election was not particularly radical or highly politicised, it was, nevertheless, in some degree 'class conscious'. Indeed, his own bland dismissal of problems widely felt and genuinely burdensome in working-class circles might be taken to epitomise the insensitivity at the heart of the Conservative administration which had so estranged the support of working people. Middle-class politicians had come to appear neither to truly comprehend working-class concerns, nor to wish

---

1. Erdington Division Women's Unionist Branch minutes, 16;7;1929.
2. Neville Chamberlain Papers, NC2/20; Diary entry, 8;6;1929.

genuinely to defend them. The Labour Party, a working-class party in a way in which no other party could claim or aspire to be, as yet unblemished by real power or failure in office, now seemed the most realistic and attractive alternative available to the two tried and distrusted parties of the middle class. Unionist politicians could lament the fact that the 1929 elections had demonstrated more class feeling in the working-class electorate than they had ever before experienced but they appeared powerless or unwilling to alter the economic and political realities which had given it form and presence.[1]

Labour's rise was also associated with a generational change in the make-up of the electorate. 'The old people still supported us', claimed Austen Chamberlain, 'but the young were sullen and resentful and voted socialist almost solidly'.[2] The older generation, whose politics were shaped in an arena where Conservatives and Liberals reigned supreme, who in Birmingham retained fond memories of the pre-war heyday of Chamberlainite politics, was fading away to be replaced by a younger age-group whose political socialisation occurred in the 1920s. Their political consciousness was evolved in the political and industrial ferment of the post-war period in which both the old parties were discredited and in which Labour stood out as a viable and hopeful alternative. They had no traditional loyalties and few practical incentives to vote for a Conservative Party whose chief promise appeared to be more of the same.

Thus it was that in 1929 Labour took six of the twelve Birmingham constituencies with 42 per cent of the total poll. Aston, Deritend, Duddeston, Erdington, Ladywood and Yardley fell to Labour; in West Birmingham, Austen Chamberlain held on to his father's seat by just 43 votes. The one fly in the ointment so far as Labour was concerned was the loss of King's Norton - a defeat ascribed to the fact that the new Unionist candidate was more

---

1. BUA, Letters relating to the West Birmingham Constituency, 1922-1937; Austen Chamberlain to E.R. Canning, 20;6;1929; E.R. Canning to Austen Chamberlain, 21;6;1929.
2. Austen Chamberlain Papers, AC5/1/475; Austen to Ida Chamberlain, 6;6;1929.

personally appealing than had been his predecessor, Sir Herbert Austin, and Austin's predictions that the Longbridge works would be forced to close should a Labour Government be returned.[1]

In Sheffield, Labour polled just over half the total vote and won five of the seven local constituencies. The victories in Park and Central by large margins meant that every working-class division was held, apparently safely, by the Labour Party.

In the country at large, Labour was now the largest single party though still outnumbered by Conservatives and Liberals combined. This time there could be no doubt that MacDonald would form the new government and, in June, 1929, Labour took office amidst many bright hopes and much popular goodwill. To the activists of the Labour movement, the second Labour Government promised a period of radical change and genuine progress towards the Socialist Commonwealth; the less committed believed, at least, that it could do no worse than the Conservative administrations that had gone before. The dreams were shattered, the hopes turned sour; Labour failed and failed ignominiously, and it was to suffer its greatest-ever electoral set-back in 1931. How did this transformation take place?

---

1. T.C., 7;6;1929.

5.6 1929-1931: The Second Labour Government

Five months after Labour took office, the international economic order was plunged into chaos by the collapse of American business confidence manifested in the Wall Street Crash. The Labour Government inherited a high but relatively stable figure of 1m. unemployed; within a year, this figure had doubled, and by the summer of 1931 it seemed destined to top the 3m. mark.

Labour had been elected on promises to end unemployment but now its reaction was confused and inadequate. Genuine perplexity and impotence in the face of a problem of supra-national proportions mingled with a certain schadenfreude in the difficulties of international capitalism and led to a response which, while satisfying Labour ideologues, could have done little to placate the victims of unemployment and disillusioned Labour voters. 'Why should the Labour Party be expected to shoulder the responsibility of Capitalist unemployment?' asked Fred Montague M.P. of a rally of the Sheffield Central Labour Party faithful who probably did not have the nerve or inclination to reply 'because it was the elected Government of the country' Unhindered, Montague continued:[1]

> For the last forty years Socialists had been saying that unemployment was inevitable, and that eventually it would mean the breaking up of the capitalist system. Despite this, however, the Labour Government was doing its best, although severely handicapped, to deal with the problem. The Government was in office on a minority vote and the best it could do was to provide some alleviation to the problem.

To some, and to increasing numbers as the Party's failure grew more obvious, this anodyne and complacent treatment of a massive social evil was unsatisfactory. Within the Labour Party, the most prominent figure to urge more radical action was Sir Oswald Mosley who, in February, 1930, submitted a Memorandum to the Cabinet advocating planned foreign trade, greater government direction of the economy, and the use of credit to promote

---

1. S.D.I., 14;6;1930.

expansion. On the rejection of his proposals, Mosley resigned his official position to continue the campaign in the Party at large. He was unable to overcome the conservatism and financial orthodoxy which dominated Labour and trades union circles, however, and in February, 1931 he abandoned the Labour Party and founded a new and separate vehicle for his ideas and ambition. Only four other M.P.s joined the New Party, one of whom was John Strachey, his faithful lieutenant and the Labour representative for Aston. They were followed by an even smaller number of Labour activists; Mosley had committed the cardinal sin in the Labour movement - that of disloyalty. Birmingham Labour, with few exceptions, rejected their erstwhile hero and his breakaway party and closed ranks behind its traditional leaders. As George Sawyer M.P. put it, he preferred 'to trust MacDonald and Snowden who had given life service to the Movement rather than new and unstable men'.[1]

Nevertheless, even the instinctive loyalty of those in the Labour Party was being tried to the limits by the Government's unquestioning adherence to the tenets of orthodox finance even when they conflicted with the interests of its working-class supporters. The 1929 Unemployment Insurance Act, which retained the 'waiting period' and the 'not genuinely seeking work' clause and kept the rate of adult male benefit at 17/- a week despite earlier Labour pleas for its increase, was a case in point, and there is no doubt that Labour's economic record and its poor treatment of the unemployed were the major factors in the electoral reverses of 1930. In the Brightside parliamentary by-election in February, 1930, Labour's majority fell by 8734 votes. In the annual municipal elections in November, Labour lost five seats in Birmingham and six in Sheffield.The report of the committee of the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council established to investigate these losses was unequivocal:[2]

> During the past twelve months /the unemployment/ figures have increased considerably,and the man in the street believes that

---

1. T.C., 14;6;1931.
2. SFTLC minutes, 'Report on result of Municipal Elections, November, 1930', 17;1;1931.

> the increase is due to the fact that a Labour Government is in power...In other circles, the view is held that the Government has not taken all the steps which are within its power to ameliorate the position, and that in addition the administration of the Unemployment Insurance Act has operated in a harsh manner against thousands of unemployed claimants.

The fund of popular goodwill which the Labour Government could draw on was being rapidly diminished and by the summer of 1931 it seems to have become almost exhausted. For the activists of the Labour Party, the last straw was the Unemployment Insurance Anomalies Bill introduced in July and designed to cut down on the so-called abuses of the benefits system, principally by women and seasonal workers. J.W. Holland of the Sheffield ILP put the views of the rank and file in a nutshell:[1]

> They wanted to know why the Government was so panicky of the banks and financiers...They knew the Government's difficulties at the present time and therefore it was difficult to oppose them, but they contended that the bill would injure the unemployed... He though it was one of the biggest mistakes the Government had made. They were taking £5 million from the workers to save the rich from taxation.

In both Birmingham and Sheffield, the Labour movement passed resolutions condemning unreservedly the legislative proposals of its own Government.[2]

The final crisis for the MacDonald administration began at the end of July with the publication of the report of the May Committee on Economy. The report predicted a budget shortfall of £170m. in the current year and recommended that, in order to balance the budget, cuts of £96m. be made in public spending, two thirds of which were to be made up by a cut in unemployment benefit by 20 per cent.[3] The Committee's dire analysis triggered a crisis of confidence in financial circles and fears were expressed that a run on the pound would cause German-style inflation and economic collapse. It became imperative for the Government to balance the budget but the Cabinet was unable to agree on any programme of cuts. On August, 23, when a minority of nine ministers (including A.V. Alexander, the M.P. for Hillsborough) opposed the suggested ten per cent cut in

---

1. S.D.I., 29;7;1931.
2. ibid.; T.C., 3;7;1931.
3. Taylor, op. cit., p. 288.

unemployment benefit, it became clear that no solution would be reached and that Labour would have to resign. Twenty-four hours later, by a process and logic which is still not clear, Ramsay MacDonald had become the Prime Minister of a national coalition government.

Only seven Labour ministers and eight M.P.s followed MacDonald; the Parliamentary Labour Party and the Labour movement in Birmingham and Sheffield and the country at large united behind the leadership of Arthur Henderson and the dissenting ministers.[1] The Labour Party was able to return to the luxury of opposition and, when in September the National Government carried out the threat to reduce state salaries and unemployment benefits by ten per cent, Labour politicians were briefly optimistic that the support of those whom they had previously failed would now come swinging back. A.V. Alexander claimed that 'the working classes throughout the country were united in their support for our stand'.[2] Other Labour M.P.s, such as Fred Longden and George Sawyer in Birmingham, predicted convincing Labour victories in the forthcoming General Election.[3] That such beliefs were not merely the product of wishful thinking and tunnel vision was evidenced by the fact that even the Birmingham Mail forecast that Labour would probably lose at most two or three of its seats in the city.[4]

Such optimism was severely misplaced. In Birmingham, even in Sheffield Labour lost every seat and in the country as a whole it was reduced to a rump of just 52 M.P.s. 554 M.P.s were returned pledged to support the coalition. In the municipal elections which followed one week later, Labour fared equally abysmally. In Birmingham, the Party failed to win a single seat; in Sheffield, where Labour loyalties were a little firmer, the Party held on narrowly to seven seats but lost eight others.

In seeking to account for this appalling reverse to their Party,

---

1. BTC minutes, 5;9;1931; T.C., 18;9;1931; SFTLC minutes, 25;8;1931.
2. S.C., September, 1931.
3. T.C., 23;10;1931.
4. B.M., 10;10;1931.

Labour activists were in no doubt of what and who to blame. To Fred Longden, it was 'The "Panic" that was called an Election', and he accused the National Government and its allies of every underhand means to win popular support:[1]

> INTIMIDATION through the workshop and the press,
> BRIBERY by "shillings" and other means,
> DEMORALISATION by booze and bilge,
> FAVOURITISM by property owners,
> UNTRUTHS by the score,
> BROADCASTING with a distinct bias against Labour candidates.

However, it would be mistaken to accept this burst of spleen as an accurate portrayal of the temper of the times. Though the campaign was fraudulent in the sense that we can see, with hindsight, that it was fought on issues and proposals which were irrelevant to Britain's real economic problems, it was not a stampede. The 'panic', if it can be described as such, was controlled, actuated by the belief that the country's problems needed a united effort by all men of goodwill to overcome its short-term difficulties through the 'common sense' solutions so widely canvassed. As M.A. Hamilton observed:[2]

> The appeal of the National Government carried everything before it because it was felt to be an essentially non-material appeal. Voters believed that the country was in danger. In that belief, they were ready to make sacrifices, even welcomed sacrifices. MacDonald interpreted their mood far more truly than the Labour Party "realists" who counted on a solid working-class vote against cuts in unemployment benefit.

In more reflective mood, even the Birmingham Labour movement recognised the truth of this analysis:[3]

> The campaign was fought in an atmosphere of patriotic fervour and national fear. The people responded to an appeal for "National Unity" and were not in a mood to reason. Experience has shown how futile it is to offer arguments against the deceptive slogan - "Country First".

In fact, nationally the Labour vote held up relatively well considering the style of its departure from office, and Labour was crippled not so much by the unprincipled nature of the National Government attack as by the fact

---

1. Deritend Commonwealth, December, 1931.
2. Quoted in R. Bassett, Nineteen Thirty-One (1958), p. 334.
3. BTC Annual Report, 1931-32, p. 48.

that it faced a united opposition with no significant third party intervention to split its opponents' vote.[1] Even in Birmingham, where the local Movement had suffered the additional shock of the defection of two of its former heroes, the Labour poll was higher than in any other election but 1929. Labour was annihilated by the rise of 110,000 votes in the Unionist poll. Labour's opponents drew their maximum poll; those previously agnostic or apathetic, those who had earlier been willing to give Labour the benefit of the doubt, now returned with a vengeance to the safe haven of Unionism and the 'national' cause. The tragedy for Labour in Birmingham was that 1931 had dealt a lasting blow to the Party's standing; thereafter, Labour maintained a plateau of support in parliamentary and municipal elections but it showed no signs of breaking through. It was not until 1945 that the Party was to make significant gains amongst the local electorate. The hope that Birmingham would soon fall inevitably into socialist hands which had buoyed up the local Labour movement in the 1920s, given credence by the Labour Party's steadily improving performance in the polls, was now dissipated. Birmingham's quick recovery from the economic recession and its unparalleled prosperity in the 1930s were additional reasons for the local working class to retain its old allegiances.

In Sheffield, the immediate results of the electoral débâcle of 1931 were even more serious for, as well as losing its five parliamentary seats, Labour was to lose control of the Council in the following year. In 1932, Labour actually increased its vote and outpolled its rivals but the adjustment of the aldermanic seats after the losses sustained in 1930 and 1931 gave a temporary majority to the anti-Labour coalition. But Labour gains in 1933 restored the Party to power and were supplemented by the regaining of four of its parliamentary seats in 1935. Sheffield retained a far larger hard core of Labour support and its loyalty was reinforced by the National Government's failure to alleviate the very serious economic problems which continued to beset Sheffield throughout the 1930s.

---

1. C. Cook, J. Stevenson, The Slump (1977), ch. 6.

5.7 Conclusion

Between 1918 and 1931, the wheel appeared to have turned full circle. Once more a pitifully weak and ineffectual Labour Party faced a coalition government elected with overwhelming public support. But, despite these superficial similarities in the two situations, important changes had taken place. Nationally, Labour had won almost three times as many votes in 1931 as it had in 1918; in Birmingham and Sheffield, almost four times. It was necessary for the editor of the Town Crier to sound a note of hope in this, Labour's darkest hour, but he spoke truthfully when he proclaimed that:[1]

> The cause of Labour has reached rock bottom. But what a wonderfully strong and solid rock on which to build.

There was a sense, belied, admittedly, by its electoral performance, in which Labour's title as the real party of the working class held good even as it was being devastated at the polls. Labour maintained a bedrock of class support and a touchstone of class ideology which the middle-class parties could not and did not seek to challenge. It had begun to seem natural for working people to vote for the Labour Party.

But such statements, once considered unexceptionable, must now be hedged and qualified. It is no longer sufficient to explain the rise of Labour as the inevitable corollary of a class system and class-based patterns of voting. As Labour's 'Forward March' has been halted, as the Party's stock among working-class voters has fallen, many commentators have attempted a deeper and more meticulous analysis of the way in which class and party allegiances evolved and interacted. From our own study, three broad themes stand out.

In the first place, class-party loyalties were not innate or predetermined but were formed and forged in the historical practice of individuals and groups. As it happened, many of the events and issues with

---

1. T.C., 6;11;1931.

the widest popular impact in the 1920s were ones in which divided class interests and sympathies were unusually clearly illustrated. The nature of the employers' counter-attack, the conduct of the General Strike and the form and content of Conservative government were such as to highlight the class affiliations of their principal agents and participants and enhance Labour's standing as the working-class party. The political and economic realities of the post-war decade were, in general, peculiarly suited to accentuate and consolidate the Labour Party's credentials as a party which put the interests of the working class foremost.

But, in following this argument, it is not necessary to suppose any naive faith in the Labour Party among working people; Labour support may have grown simply because their distrust of the alternatives was greater. In the light of recent electoral developments, political scientists have called into question the old model of party identification; it has been suggested that party loyalties do not result from an overriding commitment to one party but, rather, from a supposition that other parties would be comparatively less satisfactory.[1]

In re-examining the history of the 1920s, this argument appears particularly apposite. The record of Lloyd George's post-war Coalition Government tainted both the traditional parties but it discredited Liberalism especially. The credibility of the Liberal Party had already been disastrously weakened by the long-running split between its Asquithian and Lloyd George factions, and by the early 1920s the Party seemed to have ruled itself out of the running as a realistic or trustworthy alternative government. (This was all the more strongly the case in Birmingham and Sheffield where the Liberals' subordination to, or accommodation with, their Conservative opponents virtually destroyed the possibility of their playing an independent role in political life.) The Conservative Party, on the other hand, remained the principal party of government and, as such, it inevitably

---

1. I. Crewe, 'Party Identification Theory and Political Change in Britain' in I. Crewe at al. (eds), Party Identification and Beyond (1976).

shouldered a large part of the blame for whatever contemporary events and developments were causing discontent amongst the electorate. The Labour Party, vehement in its condemnation of the old parties, scornful of contemporary iniquities, redolent with promise of better things to come, stood forth as the one, genuine, untried alternative. This, in itself, was a major factor in its advancement. Conversely, the shameful failure of the second Labour Government robbed the Party of this important element in its appeal and ensured that the more naive and high-flown of the hopes placed in it were laid to rest. Thereafter, Labour made little real headway until the unique conjuncture of circumstances found in the Second World War revived its standing and attractiveness.

Finally, we would argue that, though class-party loyalty is one of the constants governing electoral behaviour, it cannot be considered in any uncomplicated fashion as the principal constant. In 1967, a respected observer could write that 'class is the basis of British politics; all else is embellishment and detail'.[1] Nowadays, this generalisation no longer appears valid. To some extent, its case has been superseded by socio-economic changes such as the decline of the traditional manual working class and the contraction of blue collar trades unionism; but its argument was always wrong, or at least simplistic, in principle.

One reason for this is that class-party loyalty has always been, in essence, a pragmatic judgment. Class affiliations could predispose people to assume the worst of one party and give the benefit of the doubt to another but, in the final analysis, any political party had to justify the support given to it by its performance in office or the credibility of its opposition. Many working people have voted Labour because they believed the Party to be the best safeguard and guarantor of their interests, and a shared class identity has undoubtedly been one element which has strengthened

---

1. P.G.J. Pulzer, Political Representation and Elections in Britain (1967), p. 98.

their attachment to the Labour Party. But, on the other hand, others, with the same judgment in mind and the same interests at heart, have voted Conservative. Class influenced but did not dictate political loyalties.

Secondly, class has not, by any means, always been the most salient factor determining political choice. Class has always been countervailed, and sometimes overshadowed, by other important realities in working-class life. Not the least of these, of course, has been nationality, and the elections of 1918 and 1931 should be sufficient evidence that party loyalties based on class may be readily overturned when national interests are uppermost in popular consciousness.

To sum up, therefore; class was a political variable - a constant element in Labour's support and a particularly important one in the 1920s but never one which acted purely or autonomously. Class and party loyalties were developed in the post-war decade within a specific conjuncture of political and socio-economic circumstances, and they should be explained rather than assumed. Labour's growing identity as the working-class party did stand it in good stead amongst working-class voters in the years to come but it did not, in itself, guarantee it working-class support and it never operated to the exclusion of other ideological or empirical judgments. Class biassed the critical faculties but never overrode them.

Chapter 6

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

6.1 Introduction

The one other major point of contact between the working class, their employers and the State was local government. In fact, given the direct concern of municipal administration with issues such as housing, sanitation, education, gas and electricity, and public transport, it was, in many ways, the sphere of government which had the largest impact on working-class lives. As a consequence, the nature of local political rule was one of the most important influences determining the political affiliations of working-class electors. Clearly, this was particularly the case in the municipal elections but the style of local government, by the impression it gave of the character and capacities of the chief contenders for national political power, also went some way to modifying patterns of support for the major parties at the parliamentary level.

The sphere of local government assumes particular importance in our case studies because nowhere was the contrast between Birmingham and Sheffield more sharply drawn. The middle-class politicians of Birmingham showed skill and a genuine compassion in their administration of the city, and the record of local Unionism was an important element in the continuing strength of working-class Conservatism. In Sheffield, the right-wing parties seemed content to rule against rather than with the local working class, an attitude which attained its nemesis in their electoral downfall in 1926. Thereafter, it was Labour politicians who ruled and, by most objective accounts, ruled well.[1]

---

1. Appendix E gives details of the results and voting figures of the municipal elections in Birmingham and Sheffield between 1919 and 1931.

6.2 Birmingham

It was argued earlier that it is a mistake to treat Birmingham's Unionist traditions as mere reverence for the past. Chamberlainism was sustained by more than an anachronistic ancestor worship; it was given fresh life and purpose by a Unionist administration of the City Council which continued to infuse its political rule with a powerful and popular mixture of social reform and civic pride. The Civic Gospel lived on, though in muted form, through the continuing belief of many middle-class politicians in Birmingham in the duties and beneficent capacities of local government. In Birmingham, the City Council continued to attract an unusually high-class and talented leadership, imbued with a political and ethical commitment to its reforming role and the part they played in it. The Birmingham Mail was being partisan but not entirely unfair when it argued that:[1]

> "the Chamberlain tradition" in Birmingham stands for something higher and nobler than party allegiance, though it stands for that as well in a degree which is unique in the political history of the great cities of Europe. Indeed, it is part of a great tradition - that of zealous service to the community which, happily for our city, has been and is still maintained by many distinguished local families. The Beales, the Kenricks, the Cadburys, the Martineaus, the Lloyds - these and other familiar names have been household words in our city for long past.

The practical effects of such devotion were to be seen in a range and depth of municipal services and facilities which were probably unequalled in the country. The Public Health Department of the Council employed almost one thousand people and ran two isolation hospitals, four tuberculosis sanitoria and 25 infant welfare centres. 24 bathing establishments were operated by the Municipality, offering the public the use of 26 pools and 664 private baths. Educational provision, though admitted to be unsatisfactory at secondary level, was otherwise impressive, with special schools for blind, deaf and disabled children and two open-air schools for the weakly and anaemic in addition to the normal schooling facilities.[2]

---

1. B.M., 17;11;1926.
2. W.S. Body (ed.) Birmingham and Its Civic Managers (Birmingham, 1928), passim.

Birmingham was also unique in possessing its own Municipal Bank, established in 1916 after a persistent campaign against much institutional opposition by the then Lord Mayor, Neville Chamberlain, and a Labour councillor, Eldred Hallas. By 1928, there were 45 branches of the Bank and almost a quarter of a million depositors.[1] The Municipal Bank, in particular, attracted the admiration and envy of many Labour councillors and activists up and down the country because it seemed to offer a means of taking financial power from the bankers and placing it in the hands of the people's elected representatives. But Birmingham remained unique. Though the establishment of a municipal bank was one of the most dearly-held objectives of the Labour Party in Sheffield, its attempts to implement the policy foundered on the rigid opposition of the Treasury.[2]

Perhaps the Corporation's greatest achievement lay in its programme of municipal house-building where it boasted a record unparalleled by any comparable authority. Between 1920 and 1931, Birmingham built 502 new houses per 10,000 of its population; its nearest competitor amongst the eleven major cities attained a rate of only 359 per 10,000.[3] Birmingham's 30,000th. municipal house was opened by the Labour Minister of Health, Arthur Greenwood, in July, 1930, and in all 36,825 new municipal house were constructed in the city between 1920 and 1931.[4]

Such a scale of civic enterprise did not fail to impress even the Labour politicians of Birmingham though, of course, they put their own gloss on the achievement. As the Labour councillor, W.H. Milner wrote:[5]

> Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Birmingham is that whilst for 45 years, it has been the "Mecca of Toryism and Private Enterprise", and its Council, composed of a large majority of people who, by training and instinct, have an inherent dislike of any

---

1. Body, op. cit., p. 133.
2. J.S. Rowett, 'The Labour Party and Local Government: Theory and Practice in the Interwar Years', Ph. D. thesis, University of Oxford, 1979, pp. 127-128.
3. A. Briggs, History of Birmingham. Vol.II, Borough and City, 1865-1938 (1952), p. 230.
4. Birmingham Medical Officer of Health, Annual Report, 1931, p. 36.
5. ILP Easter Conference, 1930. Birmingham Souvenir Programme, p. 49.

> suggestion of public ownership, yet it can probably show a greater measure of municipal enterprise than any other municipality in Great Britain. Its civic history is an inspiring record of the success and practicality of social ownership, even when administered by those who do not believe in it.

In local politics, the Birmingham Labour movement was clearly in a difficult position. There was much about which there was justifiable room for complaint - many thousands of slums remained, there was a long waiting-list for council housing, serious discrepancies remained in the wards' health indices, municipal services might have been run more cheaply, and so on - and Labour always argued that more could and should have been done by the Corporation. But at times, set against the Council's positive achievements, the Labour Party's critical stance may have seemed to represent a rather querulous and negative opposition for opposition's sake.

Reading through the municipal election addresses of the Unionist and Labour Parties in Birmingham, one is struck by the many similarities in their programmes and proposals. Both stressed the need for more housing, sanitary improvements and work-schemes for the unemployed; both were broadly pledged to reform. The following election address, issued in 1927, could have been put out quite happily by either party but for the party label:[1]

> As a working man, as one who has to work for his weekly wage, I claim fully to understand the needs and difficulties of working-class people, and if elected my one big object would be to urge and support a bold, progressive and sound policy for the betterment of the conditions under which you and I have to labour and live. I stand as a Unionist candidate because I honestly believe that the Unionist Party is doing its level best to achieve that object.

To the editor of the Town Crier, this was a sign of Tory hypocrisy:[2]

> Once a year - always a week or two before the November elections - the Unionists pose as social reformers and preach the gospel of social reform as ardently as the most "extreme" Socialists.

But equally, the charge might be reversed. In 1921, the Unionist organ, Straight Forward argued that:[3]

> the utter weakness of the Labour case is further revealed when we

1. Birmingham Municipal Election Literature, BCL; St. Mary's, 1927.
2. T.C., 5;2;1926.
3. Straight Forward, October, 1921.

> find that there is hardly a line in /their/ address which could not be issued with perfect sincerity by any Unionist candidate.

The truth was that the Unionists had effectively dished their Labour opponents both by their political platform which continued to stress reform and the defence of working-class conditions, and by the practical achievements of their long record of municipal government. This was admitted even by Labour politicians; according to W.H. Milner, 'the average man or woman sees very little difference between the two programmes and therefore does not bother'.[1] Milner proposed that the problem should be solved by Labour consciously making its programme more ideological, by raising the real issue as one between Socialism and Capitalism. It seems fair to conclude, however, that, had this advice been followed, its principal effect would have been to isolate the Labour Party yet further from a working-class electorate more concerned with practical reform than apparently theoretical argument.

The one important difference with regard to the city-wide appeal that the two parties could make was that, while Labour was committed by its structure and ideology to preaching a single, primarily class-determined, message, Unionism could vary its platform according to the specific electorate it was trying to reach. Whereas Labour candidates generally campaigned on a single manifesto, the Unionist Party functioned as a coalition of middle-class and working-class politicians who, within a broad unity, were able to emphasise the policies which were most attractive to themselves and their constituencies. A Unionist candidate in a middle-class ward might stand for rigid economy whilst his counterpart seeking working-class votes could be advocating expensive reform. There is a sense in which the long dominance of the Unionist Party in Birmingham had led to a situation in which it was widely perceived as by far the most legitimate and realistic option open to the city's would-be legislators. It attracted a wide variety of politicians, from strict economist to idealistic reformer,

---

1. T.C., 5;2;1926.

and gave leeway and hope to them all. This, in turn, fostered the broad appeal by which it was able to maintain its political supremacy. The position conformed closely to that described by S.M. Lipset where:[1]

> a self-perpetuating political cycle develops in which the existence of a legitimate political monopoly forces people into operating within that framework to achieve reforms; and since they operate within it, its security is reinforced.

Unionism was able to appear, as a result of the broad class spectrum it contained and the balanced policies its pursued, almost apolitical or, at least, non-party political in its administration of the city. As the preceding chapter demonstrated, national economic and political issues intervened in the 1920s and, to some extent, they were able to reveal the essential class interests represented by Unionism. At such times, a politics based on the reality of class could and did assert itself; otherwise, Birmingham Unionism was remarkably successful in cultivating an appearance and a reality of impartial and progressive civic administration which won for it deep and lasting support among all classes.

---

1. S.M. Lipset, Political Man (1966), p. 273.

6.3 Sheffield

In Sheffield, the middle-class administration formed by the Sheffield Citizens' Alliance, which ruled from 1919 to 1926, had no comparable tradition of municipal reform and civic service. Though in the past both Liberal and Conservative Parties had taken significant steps to improve conditions in the town, the coalition they formed together after the War was founded on almost entirely negative premises. Its raison d'être was opposition to the Labour Party; its motivating force, anti-Socialism, and it seemed constrained by its make-up and ideology from making any more positive appeal to the electorate. The one post-war election in which the Citizens' Alliance made any attempt to outline a progressive role and commitment for the Corporation, that of 1919, saw it badly defeated by the Labour Party.[1] Thereafter, the Alliance, despite the fact that it was the ruling party, seemed to retreat into a purely oppositional and negative stance.

The chief policy of the Citizens' Alliance administration was one of cheese-paring economy in order to keep down the rates.- a policy which held little attraction for the disadvantaged working class who stood to gain most from an enlightened municipal administration. Thus it was that, in 1926, Sheffield Corporation operated just eight public baths and no wash-houses, that the city possessed just one infant and maternity welfare centre, and that plans to build a sanatorium for the city's consumptives (a particularly pressing problem locally due to the nature of the cutlery and tool trades) had been continually deferred on economy grounds.[2] The Council also had an especially bleak record of educational provision, in which area it was spending proportionately less than any other local authority in the country.[3] The effects of such economy were seen

---

1. H. Mathers, 'Sheffield Municipal Politics, 1893-1926. Parties, Personalities and the Rise of Labour', Ph. D. thesis, University of Sheffield, 1979, p. 233.
2. H. Keeble Hawson, Sheffield. The Growth of a City, 1893-1926 (Sheffield, 1968), pp. 49-51, pp. 86-87.
3. ibid., p. 87.

dramatically on the Manor Estate where in 1926 just 1014 of the 3000 local children were attending any sort of school and, of these, only 232 were provided with educational accommodation on the Estate.[1]

Neither was the coalition administration's record on housing and sanitary reform notably impressive. 5811 municipal houses were constructed between 1920 and 1927 (cf. Birmingham's total of 17,791 in the same period), and public health continued to be endangered by the large number of privy middens and fixed ashpits still in use in the poorer parts of the city.[2] Popular confidence in the good intent and real commitment of the Citizens' Alliance to sanitary reform was probably not much bolstered when the Sheffield Mail publicised the fact in 1923 that the Medical Officer of Health had sent 147 letters to members of the Council's Health Committee with respect to insanitary conditions in properties of which they were the landlords.[3] This exposé of the coalition's slum-owners became a major issue in the elections of 1923 and was widely believed to have been an important factor in Labour's gains that year.[4]

If the Citizens' Alliance administration gave the impression of being frugal to the point of miserliness, it did not even possess the excuse that its policies were placing the Council on a sound financial footing. In the early 1920s, the administration took a number of measures in the name of short-term economy which, in the longer term, were to add considerably to its financial burdens. The Alliance's policy of raising loans at unnecessarily high interest rates to meet immediate demands saddled Labour with a debt of £1m. on its accession to power. Its decision to abolish the compounding of rates led to the issuing of 255,000 summonses, 289 imprisonments and a

---

1. Sheffield City Council Labour Group, Six Years of Labour Rule in Sheffield (Sheffield, N.D.), p. 5.
2. A.D.K. Owen, A Report on the Housing Problem in Sheffield (Sheffield, 1931), p. 18.
3. Sheffield Mail, 19;10;1923; S.D.I., 25;10;1923.
4. S.D.I., 2;11;1923.

loss in revenues of £700,000.[1] By 1924, even some Citizens' Alliance politicians were admitting publicly that the abolition of compounding had become an electoral liability. One defeated candidate expressed the view:[2]

> that the present rating system would have to be altered. There was no better argument for Bolshevism and Communism than the present system.

In the first half of the 1920s, Labour consistently attacked the financial ineptitude of the coalition administration. Their charges struck home and, in so doing, robbed the Alliance of its principal fig-leaf of respectability - the belief that businessmen and middle-class professionals were best suited to take responsibility for the finances of a large city.

The Sheffield Citizens' Alliance complemented its reactionary policies with an aggressive and intolerant style of government which was personified in the figure of its leader, Sir William Clegg. Even his political allies were forced to admit his failings as a politician:[3]

> He failed to see that the Socialistic-Labour agitation which was growing required careful treatment...When in the course of events it became necessary for him to deal with questions raised by the Labour party, his advice was "Well, let us fight them" and this course he pursued blindly to the end.

By the 1920s, Clegg - who was in his seventies, was temperamentally and ideologically incapable of making any attempt to accommodate Labour or the aspirations it represented, and he exhibited his antipathy to Labour claims in the Council by a series of actions which can only be viewed as unjust and politically ill-conceived.

In both 1921 and 1923, Labour was forced to boycott the committee work of the Council in protest at the demonstrably unfair allocation of Committee places which had been made by the Citizens' Alliance majority.[4] Thus in 1923, while Labour representatives (who formed one third of the elected Council) were granted one seat in fifteen on the most important

---

1. V. Thomas, A. Ballard, Forty Years of Labour Rule in Sheffield (Sheffield, N.D.), p. 7.
2. S.D.I., 3;11;1924.
3. R. Styring, My Life Story (Frome, 1940), p. 229.
4. S.D.I., 10;11;1921; 12;11;1923.

committees, on those with less power and political 'glamour' they took one in three.[1] Even more blatantly, the Citizens' Alliance refused to grant any increase in Labour's aldermanic representation despite its greatly enlarged role on the Council. By 1925, this policy had reached the point where the Citizens' Alliance was represented by 23 councillors and 15 aldermen, and Labour by 22 councillors and just 2 aldermen. Clegg justified the position with the motto 'To the victor, the spoils' but his taunt rebounded on him in the following year when the coincidence of sweeping Labour gains with the triennial aldermanic elections led to the victorious Labour Party taking the opportunity to evict Clegg and six other long-serving coalition aldermen and replacing them with its own men. Clegg's departure was not widely mourned; his stewardship had aroused fierce antipathy and even his one-time political ally, Alderman Moses Humberstone, described him as 'the biggest autocrat I know'.[2] In the East End, political opposition was married to a pronounced personal antagonism dating from his deeply unpopular chairmanship of the local Munitions Tribunal during the First World War.[3]

Clegg, though by far the most prominent opponent of Labour in the public eye, was not alone in an attitude and style which seemed calculated to repel rather than attract the working-class voter. Clegg was a Liberal, his political alter ego on the Conservative benches was Sir Albert Hobson, an irascible and single-minded proponent of 'economy'. A speech he made in 1922, in which he claimed that the people of Sheffield had discovered a new industry - breeding - by which to claim additional benefit, was widely exploited by Labour propagandists and won him few friends in a deeply troubled working class.[4] In general, the coalition politicians of Sheffield seemed unable to conceive of the Labour Party as anything more than an

1. S.D.I., 12;11;1923.
2. S.D.I., 18;11;1926.
3. S.D.I., 26;10;1923.
4. S.D.I., 26;10;1922.

opponent to be derided and vanquished; that their behaviour might increase Labour sympathies amongst a working-class electorate in which the Party already played a secure and trusted role appears to have gone unnoticed. 'What are the Labour Party?', asked Cllr. Matt Sheppard at a by-election meeting on behalf of the Citizens' Alliance. He answered his own question with the reply, 'They are colossal humbugs, hypocrites, Bolshevists, Fabians and the cosmopolitan refuse of Europe'.[1] To the working-class electors of Darnall, this probably seemed a little hard on the Labour Party whose outgoing councillor was Cecil Wilson and whose current candidate was the mild-mannered and deeply respectable, R.H. Minshall. Sheppard's outburst may have satisfied his own temperament but did little to win over the electorate who returned Minshall by a large majority.

In short, it seems as if the Citizens' Alliance, by its policies and bearing, conspired in its own downfall. H. Keeble Hawson, the historian of the Corporation and himself a Conservative councillor, summed up judiciously the role played by the Citizens' Alliance until its defeat in 1926:[2]

> The sudden postwar depression had produced a startling change. All ideas of progress and expansion had been forgotten. Economy in all directions and at all costs became paramount. The men who had guided the Council for so long and had inspired the vigorous policies of earlier years had grown old; they could not face the challenge of the times and so Sheffield in 1926 became the first of the big cities to fall under Socialist control.

When it took office in 1926, the Sheffield Labour Party faced a legacy of political misrule and a local economy, still gripped by a deep and long-lasting depression, which would have tested the most able and experienced administrators. Despite these adverse conditions, most observers agree that Labour ruled competently and humanely in the years that followed and achieved a real and worthwhile improvement in the quality of life of its working-class supporters.

Labour took the opportunity to carry out a series of long overdue

---

1. S.D.I., 22;3;1924.
2. Keeble Hawson, op. cit., p. xxii.

reforms. After one year of its tenure, it could claim to have abolished privy middens, begun an extensive programme for the abolition of ashpits, and stepped up the rate of house-building. Health provision for consumptives and for expectant and nursing mothers and the facilities for the blind and disabled were all considerably extended. Plans for fourteen new schools had been passed, and the city's finances and administrative apparatus had been reorganised to enable greater cost-effectiveness and efficiency.[1]

Six years after taking office, on the occasion of its first one-year loss of power, Labour published a celebratory pamphlet on Six Years of Labour Rule in Sheffield. Though clearly written with a propagandistic intent, the work points to a record of achievement and progress that cannot be gainsaid. Secondary school provision had been increased by over 80 per cent, direct labour had been introduced for the Corporation's house-building and printing, almost 9000 ashpits had been replaced by a total of 15,000 new dustbins, care of consumptives, the blind and those formerly treated in the Poor Law hospitals was taken over by the Corporation and extended, almost 8000 houses had been constructed, library issues had been doubled, 2500 courts had been lighted, and so on and so forth.[2] The Council was justifiably proud of its fine record of practical, socialist reform.

The Sheffield Labour movement was fortunate in the quality of the personnel it could call on to undertake the arduous and demanding work required by municipal government. T.H. Watkins, a railway accountant, played a dominating role in the Corporation's financial planning; Albert Ballard and J.H. Bingham were the principal architects of Sheffield's educational reforms; William Asbury had an unrivalled practical knowledge and concern for health provision.[3] But the key figure in the Labour administration was E.G. Rowlinson who led the Labour Group, with the exception of two one-year spells, from 1926 until his early death in 1941.

---

1. S.F., October, 1927.
2. Sheffield City Council Labour Group, op. cit., passim.
3. V. Thomas, A. Ballard, op. cit., pp. 3-4.

On Labour's assumption of office, Rowlinson became practically a full-time administrator, a chairman of two committees and a member of six others. He also possessed special qualities of leadership; through his patience and diplomacy, it was said that the Labour Group never came to the Council Chamber divided on any issue of principle.[1] Politicians are apt to be fondly remembered after their deaths but there is no doubt that in Rowlinson's case the plaudits were deserved. As Fred Marshall stated:[2]

> In 1926 he found himself at the head of a rather raw large party invested with the responsibilities of City Government. With consummate ability he guided it towards its great achievements until it became a model and an inspiration to struggling Labour Parties all over the country.

---

1. J. Bellamy, J. Saville (eds), Dictionary of Labour Biography, vol. 6 (1982), p. 235.
2. Edward Carpenter Memorial Service, 1947. Record of Speeches in the 1946 Service, p. 8.

6.4 Conclusion

In this section, we have emphasised the crucial role played by middle-class politicians in shaping the prospects for an independent politics of and for the working class. Middle-class politicians could not alter the reality of class divisions but they could mitigate their impact insofar as they chose or were able to pursue policies which showed a genuine regard for working-class interests and sensibilities. Given the economic and social structures of working-class life, it can be said, at least, that class-based politics were an immanent possibility, but they were not inevitable and it was certainly the case that they need not be dominant. Whether the politics of class was a powerful or insubstantial influence on local affairs still depended to a large degree on the temperaments and capacities of those acting in the political field. Social determinations and ideological predispositions inevitably influenced their actions but politicians were participating in a drama that was improvised and open-ended, not a Greek tragedy. Circumstance circumscribed their roles but left room for initiative and self-responsibility.

Nowhere are these generalisations better illustrated than in the sphere of municipal politics where the middle-class politicians of Birmingham acted with skill and vision in the successful attempt to hold on to their working-class constituency, while their counterparts in Sheffield chose to behave in ways seemingly calculated to alienate working-class support. It was not, therefore, mere 'false consciousness' which impelled the working class of Birmingham to give such strong support to Unionism; the Council had an undeniably excellent record of reform and continued to demonstrate a genuine commitment to the amelioration of working-class conditions. Its middle-class politicians had the self-confidence and ability, bolstered by their electoral strength and ideological traditions, to take on the Labour Party and defeat it on its own terms. In contrast, those in Sheffield

retreated before the Labour advance and followed a strategy of reaction and opposition whose effect was to surrender the field of reform and the defence of working-class interests entirely to their opponents. Space was left open for an independent working-class politics which a talented and cohesive Labour Party proved more than able to fill . As a result of socio-economic conditions and the inadequacies of its political opposition, Labour came to dominate the centre ground of Sheffield's municipal politics. In Birmingham, where social and economic circumstances provided a more difficult terrain, the Labour Party was pushed to the margins of political life by the power and talents of the city's Unionist rulers.

Chapter 7

LABOUR'S ETHOS AND IDEOLOGY

7.1 Introduction

The Labour Party was founded in 1900 by an alliance of trades unionists and socialists whose primary aim, as its original designation - the Labour Representation Committee - implies, was to increase the working-class presence in Parliament. It was not a doctrinal party, a party formed around a shared corpus of ideology or one united in a common adherence to certain texts and prophets. Its strength (and, many would argue, its weakness) was as a vehicle in which different interests, different emphases and different aspirations could all discover a role, in which all could find hope. Trades unionists, committed to the independent representation of labour and the defence of working-class interests, and socialists, committed to these of course but fired also by a larger vision, came together in an uneasy but potentially fruitful marriage - cooperation made possible by the objects and methods they shared but always strained by the ambitions and analyses that they held separately.

To some, the Labour Alliance was from the outset a betrayal of socialist hopes; thus Joseph Clayton, writing in 1926:[1]

> In reality the year 1900 is not the date of a forward movement towards Social Democracy, rather does it announce the turn of the tide. The high-water mark had been reached. Quietly, imperceptibly at first...the forces that helped to create a Party for the establishment of Socialism turned from the Socialist propaganda to the propaganda of party.

To such critics, ethical socialism, embodied in the ILP, was tainted, debilitated and finally overwhelmed by its pact with the tepid reformism of the trades unions, and was chronically undermined by its own growing

---

1. J. Clayton, The Rise and Decline of Socialism in Great Britain, 1884-1924 (1926), p. 106.

preoccupation with the electoral struggle. The very circumstances of Labour's parentage and birth condemned it to be a compromising and compromised dereliction of socialist aspirations. Clayton's gloomy assessment has been echoed with greater academic precision and detachment by many other commentators subsequently.[1]

Nor, it is argued, is it possible to see the adoption of the Party's new constitution in 1918 - with its socialist commitment encapsulated in the famous Clause IV - as a belated change of heart. Clause IV arose out of an organisational-cum-political need for differentiation from the Liberals and through the necessity of conveying an avowedly radical but non-revolutionary alternative to Bolshevism.[2] It was acceptable to the Party as a whole because it spoke to the narrow collectivist objectives of the trades unions and Fabians whilst, at the same time, appealing to the more radical common ownership principles of the socialists.[3] As Royden Harrison has written:[4]

> Clause IV does not indicate...the presence of a coherent ideology. It is better regarded as a rallying point around which the adherents of different ideologies and the representatives of different interests assembled.

Labour continued to be therefore, in a phrase become clichéd but nonetheless apposite, a broad church. It was a church of considerable scriptural diversity and much sectarian competition but it was, despite its heterogeneity, a body in which an assortment of believers and aspirants could come together to practise the rites common to their respective faiths.

---

1. See: S. Pierson, British Socialists. The Journey from Fantasy to Politics (Cambridge, USA, 1979);
   S. Yeo, 'A New Life. The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1906', History Workshop Journal, 4, (Autumn, 1977);
   D. Howell, British Workers and the Independent Labour Party, 1886-1906 (Manchester, 1983).
2. S. Beer, British Politics in the Collectivist Age (New York, 1969), pp. 137-49;
   J. Winter, Socialism and the Challenge of War (1974), p. 276.
3. R. Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism (New York, 1964), p. 62.
4. R. Harrison, 'The War Emergency Workers' National Committee, 1914-1920' in A. Briggs, J. Saville (eds), Essays in Labour History, 1886-1923 (1971), p. 259.

There was too a developing consensus within the Party. The old antithesis between trades unionist and socialist - perhaps always overplayed - was losing its edge. Shared assumptions and interests were forged in the day-to-day struggle and tempered by the exigencies of national and international politics. The Party was becoming something greater than the sum of its parts, and loyalty to its manners and modes was becoming more than a mere calculation of political tactics. That, in the interwar period, the means had become, at least in part, an end was incontestable. What remained in dispute was the precise purpose for which the Party had been formed but this potential conflict was, for the most part, practically obscured by the ideas, methods and short-term objectives which united Labour's diverse elements.

It is Stuart Macintyre who has argued most fully for the existence of a distinct and comprehensive Labour Party ideology - which he terms Labour Socialism - in the 1920s but he observes correctly that its decisive influence emerged most clearly at the local level.[1] Those political ideologues who have tried their hand at history have been quick to interpret Labour's story in terms of its leaders' treachery and ideological inadequacies but, in fact, the working-class rank and file of the Party cannot be acquitted so easily. If Labour failed, and this is usually the gist of the ideologues' analysis, it failed with their - the rank and file's - active complicity. The politics of the Labour Party were not imposed from above; they were a reflection and a refraction of the ideas and aspirations of the Party's grass roots, the product of an interaction of central and local influences in which neither was determining but in which both were mutually reinforcing. The structure and form of Labour politics that MacDonald and the other Party leaders built up at the national and parliamentary level depended for its existence on the assent or, at the

---

1. S. Macintyre, A Proletarian Science (Cambridge, 1980), p. 65.

very least, the acquiescence of the rank and file. In practice, the local activists endorsed the national consensus that was emerging and gave it local content and impact by their own political work.[1]

In this section, we describe and document the ethos and ideology of the Labour Party as it was evinced and practised at the local level in Birmingham and Sheffield. Where possible we have sought to use the actual words of its adepts and spokesmen. Terminologically, we have chosen to distinguish between two layers of the Party's thinking. By its ethos, we mean that set of barely defined and, for that matter, barely definable assumptions and beliefs that underpinned Labour's philosophy and practice. By its ideology, we refer to the more articulated and coherent statements and policies which formed the practical reality of Labour's politics.[2] The real point, though, is that, while these two positions are logically distinguishable, they had in fact by the 1920s become so deeply interpenetrated and enmeshed that any but a heuristic separation of their roles would be artificial and misleading. The account is divided into three sections: in the first, we examine the basis and nature of Labour s anti-capitalism; in the second, the forms and means of its socialism; in the third, the practical character of its political reformism and the internal conflicts to which this gave rise.

---

1. See also: B. Barker, 'The Anatomy of Reformism. The Social and Political Ideas of the Labour Leadership in Yorkshire', International Review of Social History, XVIII, (1973).
2. This distinction was initially formulated by H.M. Drucker in his Doctrine and Ethos in the Labour Party (1979), pp. 8-12. It is felt here, however, that Drucker's exposition of Labour's ethos is too limited in scope and should be expanded to include the more profound and quasi-religious aspects of Labour's philosophy.

7.2 Labour's Anti-Capitalism

In essence, Labour's case against the prevailing economic system was of the utmost simplicity and rested on an outright condemnation of the status quo:[1]

> The present system brings great wealth and luxury to the privileged few, and poverty, bad housing, ill health and never-ending worry to great masses of the people. This system is based on the private ownership of the people's needs, and profit-making is placed before the welfare of the community.
>
> The vast amount of Unemployment, the Shortage of Houses, and the fact that over 100,000 of our citizens are living in overcrowded, wretchedly unhealthy and insanitary conditions, the high cost of living and consequent underfeeding, increasing rents and rates, and the continuous efforts of the employers to lower wages and conditions of employment are all, undoubtedly, the results of the present system of Government (both local and national), the principle of which is based on the Right of the Individual to take Rent, Interest and Profit out of the needs of his fellows.

Labour's propaganda and the thrust of its analysis were not sophisticated but neither were the contemporary workings of the system against which it inveighed and it must have seemed to many in the Labour movement that mere description of the glaring iniquities that surrounded them would, of itself, be sufficient to rouse their fellow-workers to revolt. The working class's own experience of inequality was backed up whereever possible by the hard fact provided by census and survey reports and the work of the local Medical Officers of Health. W.E. Wheeldon's election address to the constituents of St. Bartolomew's recounted the ward's health statistics and then drew its moral:[2]

> Every slum and courtyard, every ill-clad and ill-nourished man and child is a memento of Liberal and Tory rule.
> Put an end to it! You can if you will!

These were Labour's public pronouncements, part of the appeal it made to an unconverted and ill-educated electorate, but it cannot in truth be claimed

---

1. Birmingham Municipal Election Literature, BCL; Rotton Park, 1927; ibid.; Birmingham Borough Labour Party's municipal manifesto, 1921.
2. ibid.; St. Bartholomew's, 1927.

that its own understanding of the processes underlying the wrongs it portrayed went much deeper. For the most part, the Labour pioneers felt it sufficient to publicise the evils of capitalism, name their cause and proclaim an alternative vision of how things might be.

The one exception to this (understandable) aversion to the dismal science of economics was the theory of underconsumption which had the same importance to generations of Labour activists as surplus value did to those who called themselves Marxists - which is to say that it was a vague and barely understood concept with just enough of an air of scientificity about it to lend it credence and explanatory value. Underconsumption, explaining as it did why private ownership and competition inevitably brought unemployment and poverty in their wake, was felt to be the key which unlocked the mysteries of capitalism.

The rudiments of the case were long-established and oft-repeated. Because capital and the means of production were in private hands, the workers received little of the wealth created by their labour. The prior demands of interest and profit meant that workers' wages and the purchasing power of their class were low. Because capitalism was competitive, those who owned capital and machinery were compelled both to produce as many saleable items as possible and to cut labour costs to a minimum. The first consequence of this two-fold process was to cause periodic crises of over-production when the glutted state of the market led to factory closures and unemployment. The second, chronic, consequence was that the wages, hours and numbers of those employed were constantly undermined and degraded in the drive to reduce the costs of production. Again, the effect was to diminish working-class living standards and purchasing power. This reduced purchasing power became, in the economic jargon of the day, 'underconsumption' which meant, in real terms, the working class's inability to afford the goods

and services they needed and, more cruelly, even the goods and services they actually provided in their working lives. But underconsumption, as part of a dynamic chain of circumstances in the capitalist mode of production, was not only effect but cause. Because the working class was poor, it lacked the ability to translate its genuine needs into effective demand; because effective demand was low, goods could not be bought or were not produced; because capitalists could not sell the products of their factories, they laid off their workers; because the workers were unemployed, they were poor ...and so on in a vicious circle of deprivation and poverty.

This is to describe the theory in full, in all its ramifications and subtleties. The breadth and impact of its popular appeal lay in the way that the complex reasoning of these arguments could be readily expressed in a few clear and apparently common sensical nostrums. Jim Simmons, then Labour's parliamentary candidate in Erdington, put the case well in populist terms:[1]

> Everywhere I go I find ample evidence that there is among the people a great need for all kinds of goods:- boots, clothes, food, furniture, etc.. Alongside the existence of this great need we have workers, who could be engaged upon the task of producing to meet the need, unemployed. We pay them for being unemployed and allow the need to remain unsatisfied. What madness! Yet it is part of a system that we call Capitalism.

The critique became all the more powerful when applied in a favourite parable in Labour circles - that of the bootmakers' shoeless children. Reuben Farrow, in an address on the fundamentals of socialism to the Northfield Junior Imperial League, traced the processes by which competition led to overproduction and lay-offs in the shoe industry and concluded in a ringing phrase intended to leave no-one in any doubts as to the absurdities of the capitalist system, 'hence we see bootless children, who are bootless because their fathers have made too many boots'.[2] In the underconsumptionist

---

1. Simmons Papers, vol. 2; Erdington Labour Party, Quarterly Letter from prospective Labour candidate, no. 8, July-September, 1928.
2. King's Norton Labour News, June, 1930.

critique, capitalism became not merely culpable but preposterous.

Its second point of attraction lay in the fact that, because it rested on a multi-layered and multi-facetted analysis, people from different backgrounds and of different persuasions could take up the argument at that level which best fitted their interests and objects. At one level, it was enough to draw the moral that the workers' wages were too low. The remedy? - higher wages for 'by giving real wages to the mass of the people...demand for useful goods would be increased and stabilised'.[1] The ordinary worker could cite sound economics as well as material constraint in his demand for a fair day's pay. For trades unionism, a high wage policy justified its role and gave theoretical backing to its attempted practice. The Birmingham and District Committee of the NUGMW resolved in 1923:[2]

> that the problem of unemployment is seriously aggravated by the fact that masses of the people have suffered reductions in wages which have so impaired their spending power that they are unable to lend adequate support to trade by their individual wages; and that a higher standard of wages should be promoted in all industries as the first and indispensable step towards the recovery and maintenance of good trade.

On the other hand, an ILPer using the same basic arguments could conclude that it was private ownership which led to the evil of unemployment. His remedy? - the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange.[3] If unemployment and poverty were ascribed to low wages, the socialist had no doubt that low wages were inevitable under capitalism. The underconsumptionist thesis was a train of thought which possessed different connotations for the various members of the Labour movement; most, as it were, followed the argument's passage for a few stops in the middle, a lesser number followed it from its beginnings in questioning the fundamentals of capitalism to its terminus, that distant land - the Cooperative Commonwealth.

---

1. S.C., July, 1924.
2. NUGMW District Committee (Birmingham and Western District) minutes, 11;8;1923.
3. Sheffield ILP minutes, 30;6;1921.

The theory of underconsumption was part of the Labour movement's folklore with a lineage stretching back to the Chartists and beyond, and it owed little conscious or acknowledged debt to the radical economists of the 19th. and 20th. centuries who had articulated and honed its analysis.

Essentially, however, the economic arguments were a 'scientific' gloss on a basically moral and moralistic condemnation of capitalism. Capitalism, it was said, encouraged greed, selfishness and destructive competition; indeed, its very existence and functioning depended on these malign motive forces. Socialists seldom tackled in any depth the question as to whether these regrettable traits were part of some basic 'human nature' or the product of socio-economic conditioning but, in practice, they constantly repudiated any political version of the doctrine of original sin. As Frank Andrews (of the Birmingham ILP and Union of Post Office Workers) expressed it:[1]

> the Socialist is a man or woman who believes in the ultimate magnificence of the people, because the Socialist believes that our religion and morals are so far ahead of our economics /that/... the present expediency and money power are but ape-like things and unfit for later dignity.

Capitalism would not be overcome because its economics were unsound - although they were - but because its ethics were intolerable. Reason would revolt and man's basically moral instincts would build anew once the ruinous and shabby logic of capitalism was sufficiently exposed. Socialism would come about through:[2]

> first, a revolution in the mind and heart to abolish profit-seeking; and then a revolution in industry to abolish profit-making.

As Alfred Barratt Brown, the author of the foregoing piece, rightly concluded, 'the spirit of our movement...means a great faith in the possibilities of

---

1. Forward (Organ of the Birmingham District of UPOW), August, 1928.
2. T.C., 4;6;1920.

human nature'.[1]

The critique of capitalism's immoral basis acquired added trenchancy after the First World War. Though the Labour movement contained a wide range of pro- and anti-war views, one interpretation that became widespread in the disillusionment which followed the conclusion of peace was that war was caused by the international rivalry of the leading capitalist nations. To Alfred Barton, a Sheffield ILPer, capitalism had simply:[2]

> fulfilled its foredoomed course. Trade, expansion, overseas investment, annexation, competition of nations, appropriation of unoccupied territories, competition of armaments, diplomatic intrigue, War and Hell.

War was the pursuit of capitalism by other means, and, even if one did not follow or endorse this argument in its entirety, it had become easy to sympathise with the view that (in the words of the Birmingham Trades Council):

> War is a game in which the worker never wins, whatever the official result, and, under the glorious capitalist system, the capitalist is all right whatever the result.

The ethos of Labour, with notable exceptions, had always been deeply anti-militarist. World War One temporarily shattered this unity but the conduct of the War and, more particularly, its aftermath sharpened the anti-militarist critique and gave it a more popular resonance than it had ever hitherto enjoyed. Small colonial wars that brought increased employment in the armaments firms - attractive in both Birmingham and Sheffield - and a little military 'glory' were one thing; a world war, with its massive carnage and privation, was another. After 1918, jingoism evaporated and Labour's commitment to peace and disarmament became less a liability and more an electoral advantage.

---

1. T.C., 4;6;1920. Alfred Barratt Brown (1887-1947) was the vice-principal of the Woodbrooke Settlement (an educational establishment supported by the Cadburys) and was to become principal of Ruskin College, Oxford. He was a Quaker member of the ILP and No Conscription Fellowship and had been imprisoned several times for his anti-war activities. (Information kindly supplied by his son, Michael Barratt Brown.)
2. A. Barton, A World History for the Workers (1923), p. 102.
3. BTC Annual Report, 1920, p. 8.

Finally, it would be wrong to over-intellectualise the nature or impact of Labour's appeal. Labour, as any left-wing party must do, rested its case overwhelmingly on a straightforward opposition to the status quo. Whatever grievances and wrongs existed in contemporary society were stigmatised and redress was promised. The cameo of a street-corner meeting given in the Town Crier must have been typical:[1]

> Mr. H. Parsons asked his audience, "Are you satisfied with the present life you are living?". The answer was a loud "No!". "Then vote Labour at all elections", replied Mr. Parsons.

Labour, having never yet formed a majority government, could stand in the interwar period as the antithesis of all that was unfair and irksome in the present system.[2] For the working class as a whole and the less ideologically minded of the Party's own membership, the promise of reform was enough. What was wrong under right-wing governments would be put right by a Labour Government. For the socialists, there existed an analogous dualism with a more radical connotation; what was wrong under capitalism would be abolished by socialism.

As with the theory of underconsumption, a shared structure of belief united the disparate strands of Labour activism and thinking when a deeper analysis and closer contact with the problems of power would have brought out their divergences. Differences in Labour ideology could be obscured by the essential manicheanism of Labour's ethos. The heart of Labour's anti-capitalism lay in its condemnation of the effects of capitalist economics and morals. The basis of its constructive case rested on the unproven assumption that Labour could and would remove these effects. On these two principles, Labour could unite.

---

1. T.C., 10;9;1920.
2. cf. Neville Chamberlain's assessment of the 1929 General Election on p. 209.

7.3 Labour's Socialism

The essential moralism of Labour's anti-capitalist critique found ready reflection in the highly ethical nature if its socialism. The spirit of ethical socialism still pervaded the Movement throughout the 1920s. It is true that few now preached a self-proclaimed religion of socialism but it was still the basic precepts and presuppositions of a religion of socialism that continued to mould the Movement's practice and self-image. The first section of this chapter will examine this quasi-religious side to Labour's philosophy.

In the spiritual interpretation of its role, the Labour movement was identified as a religious faith attempting to give practical expression to the teachings of the world's prophets, most notably those of Christ himself. Will Chamberlain, a Quaker pacifist and editor of the Town Crier, stated that he believed:[1]

> the Labour movement to be more truly religious than any Church... deep down in the heart of the Labour movement there is the same religious passion for righteousness that burned in the hearts of those who followed the Carpenter of Nazareth on the shores of Galilee.

It was a theme he stressed repeatedly and, when asked to give his own personal definition of socialism, he replied that to him it was:[2]

> a practical interpretation of the principles taught in the Sermon on the Mount. While the parsons are praying that God's Kingdom may come on earth, Socialists are working to bring it into being.

And he concluded by citing a text probably more widely quoted in the Labour movement than any other:[3]

> "I am come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly" said the Carpenter of Nazareth. That is the message of Socialism.

---

1. T.C., 4;5;1925.
2. D. Griffiths (ed.), What Is Socialism? A Symposium (1924), p. 22.
3. ibid.

Chamberlain may have been in a position of unusual prominence but he was far from alone in the religious gloss which he gave to his socialism (nor in his emphasis on Jesus' working-class credentials). Wilfrid Whiteley acknowledged that while:[1]

> to some Socialism was a political dogma or an economic theory; to him it came with the emotional power of a religious faith.

Whiteley had abandoned the Church of England in disgust at its lack of practical concern for the people's welfare but his politics remained profoundly ethical in inspiration.[2] Jim Simmons was another impelled into political action by his belief that the churches were failing to practise their principles but he remained a lay preacher for the Primitive Methodists and an avowed Christian Socialist.[3] Frank Smith (who fought Attercliffe in 1894 and West Birmingham in 1922 and 1923) and Cllr. Percy Shurmer were both past or present members of the Salvation Army.[4] Socialism in Birmingham, appropriately given the impact of the nonconformist-inspired Civic Gospel, was still deeply imbued with religious strains and imagery.

Turning to Sheffield, here too a number of the Labour movement's leading figures acted under religious influence. Cecil Wilson was a Congregationalist Bible Class leader and Sunday School superintendent who had joined the Labour Party because of his pacifist opposition to the First World War and because, in his words, it represented 'most nearly as a political faith the ethics of the New Testament'.[5] Arnold Freeman (the director of the Sheffield Educational Settlement and Labour's candidate in Hallam in 1923) was similarly convinced of Labour's calling:[6]

---

1. T.C., 18;3;1927.
2. 'An Interview with Wilfrid Whiteley', Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History, 18, (Spring, 1969).
3. J. Simmons, Soap-Box Evangelist (Chichester, 1972), p. 9 and passim.
4. For Percy Shurmer, see: J. Bellamy, J. Saville (eds), Dictionary of Labour Biography, Vol. 2 (1974), pp. 341-42.
5. A.C. Wilson, Cecil Henry Wilson, 1862-1945 (Sheffield N.D.), p. 3 and passim.
6. S.D.I., 28;11;1923.

> The Labour Movement is not Party politics. It is the living, practical expression of the Christianity of Jesus Christ.

Freeman even went so far as to send copies of the New Testament to his acquaintances during his election campaign, asking that they might pray for his success.[1] Arthur Ponsonby, in his work on Religion in Politics, came close to implying that socialism might surpass Christianity in its religious worth:[2]

> Political idealism, indeed, if it be sufficiently elevated, can be religion in itself. Love, altruism, cooperation, brotherhood, service, sacrifice, justice, freedom, equality of opportunity, increasing antagonism to materialism and riches, and a complete and absolute denial that force should be a regulatory factor in individual, in national, or in international affairs, is a surer, more practical, more spiritual, and a loftier creed than the Apostles, the Nicene and the Athenasian creeds rolled into one.

While Ponsonby was another disillusioned by the conduct of the established churches, his counterpart in Hillsborough, A.V. Alexander, retained his Christian faith and was a Baptist lay preacher for most of his adult life.[3]

In terms of actual political conduct, the religion of socialism entailed a difference of style and emphasis with the more secular strands of Labour ideology even though it had little other practical effect. In style, it led to a fondness for Biblical allusion and language - the Labour programme could become the 'Socialist Gospel', an election campaign could be described as a 'Great Evangel', the 'Cause of Labour' became the 'hope of the world'.[4] In emphasis, it led to a stressing of the more messianic aspirations for Labour's role and economic reforms were considered to be

---

1. W. Albaya, Through the Green Door (Sheffield, 1980), p. 34.
2. A. Ponsonby, Religion in Politics (1923), pp. 29-30.
3. Graham Mayhew's research into the religious backgrounds of Labour's M.P.s shows over half in Birmingham and Sheffield to have had a thorough grounding in Christianity and religious values which continued to inspire their politics. See: G.J. Mayhew, 'The Ethical and Religious Foundations of Socialist Politics in Britain: the First Generation and their Ideals, 1884-1931', Ph. D. thesis, University of York, 1980, Appendix.
4. Ladywood Labour News, 25;5;1929; T.C., 30;4;1920.

'merely material means to a spiritual end'.[1] Socialism was not simply to be a better version of the present society but something radically different in kind. When, in June, 1926, Wilfrid Whiteley was asked to address the monthly delegate meeting of the Birmingham Borough Labour Party, he took as his subject 'Socialism on Canvass'. He concluded his talk (on the painter, G.F. Watts) with the admission that:[2]

> if socialism meant only the obtaining of the material things of life, he should not think it worthwhile. The reason why he wanted to make it possible for all to have the necessary material things of life was in order that all could enjoy to the full the real beauty of life.

The religion of socialism took the notion of God's Kingdom on earth, mixed it with the utopia of William Morris and proclaimed the vision of the Cooperative Commonwealth.

It was further reflected in the anti-militarism which was one of the most sincerely held principles of many Labour activists. During the First World War, pacifist socialists suffered persecution and imprisonment for their anti-war beliefs; in the post-war years, conditions were less harsh and the personal choices less onerous.[3] Nevertheless, through resolutions and demonstrations, Labour Party members reaffirmed their belief in cooperation, negotiation and disarmament and their opposition to the use of war as a means of solving international disagreements. In addition, many in Birmingham and Sheffield and many thousands more up and down the country flocked to sign Arthur Ponsonby's 'Peace Pledge' by which they signified their personal refusal to take part in military action. Ponsonby himself, at the meeting in Sheffield which inaugurated his campaign, eloquently articulated the Labour movement's anti-war sentiments:[4]

> Warfare is not the Wembley tattoo. It is a dirty, foul, criminal

---

1. Bertram Jacobs speaking at the Sparkhill Labour Church, T.C., 30;4;1920.
2. T.C., 18;6;1926.
3. Jim Simmons, Fred Longden, Harrison Barrow and Will Chamberlain were among those imprisoned for their anti-war activity. Wilfrid Whiteley was a Conscientous Objector though exempted by his employment from military service.
4. S.D.I., 19;10;1925.

> business and the people who have been through it are behind this movement to prevent war. Your country does need you - but alive not dead. It needs your living health and not your rotting corpse, your full strength and not your shattered body.

From the Birmingham Borough Labour Party's demand for international arbitration and total disarmament to the Selly Oak Ward Labour Party Women's Section's call for a ban on toy soldiers and guns, Labour Party activists made the same plea and evinced the same hope - an aspiration that human affairs could be ordered by rational discourse and considerations of humanity.[1] They were rarely able to put their principles into practice except, in a small way, in Sheffield where the Labour-controlled City Council barred the Officers' Training Corps from its schools and cancelled the annual military tattoo.[2] Labour's anti-militarist idealism remained strong until well into the thirties but it was rudely treated and ultimately shattered by the more brutal principles of Hitler's Nazi dictatorship.

Although the religion of socialism was gradually being superseded by a more practically-based socialism as the prospects of political power beckoned and the more optimistic dreams of the pioneers faded, many of the basic forms of its credo remained integral to Labour practice. The nub of Labour's strategy remained the conversion of individuals to its cause and case; in short, on 'making socialists'. Will Chamberlain spoke for many others when he argued that:[3]

> the only way to the Socialist Commonwealth is to make socialists; that when we have converted a sufficient number of people to the justice of our case against the present order, then, and not till then, it will make way for a better order.

The experience of the Second Labour Government and the débâcle of 1931 strengthened rather than weakened this analysis. After the full extent of

---

1. BBLP minutes, 10;5;1928; T.C., 4;4;1924.
2. S.D.I., 7;4;1927.
3. T.C., 28;1;1921.

Labour's defeat had become known, the Town Crier bravely led with the headline 'Get Ready for Next Time'.[1] To Jim Simmons, the moral was clear:[2]

> If the people had understood Socialism no amount of personal abuse, of intimidation by bosses or of panic propaganda by opponents and erstwhile friends would have shifted them - therefore we have got to make them understand Socialism. It is "back to the soap-box" in real earnest.

The ideological corollary to this stress on individual conviction was a deeply ambiguous approach to the question of class. Surprisingly, for a body whose raison d'être was the representation of labour, the Labour Party constantly sought to rebut the charge that it was a class party. As Alfred Barratt Brown argued:[3]

> we admit the existence of class struggle today but we are out to end it, not by the transfer of privilege from one class to another, but by the abolition of privilege and all class distinctions.

Ten years later, his thesis was supported by another exponent of socialism who nevertheless sought to come to terms with the reality that Labour was basically a working-class party:[4]

> It is true that we who are Socialists base our appeal to the dustman more than the millionaire, but that is because the dustman and his class suffer more under the present system than a millionaire.

As, however, socialism was essentially a 'conviction of mind' and a programme of action which would benefit all classes, the writer went on, it would be quite mistaken to denigrate Labour as a solely class-based party.[5] Jim Simmons, on the Left of the Party, was nonetheless keen to emphasise in his 1929 election address that Labour was 'the real National Party - its policy is designed to serve the whole community and not a class'.[6]

These same attitudes enabled the easy reception and positive welcome given to such middle- and upper-class incomers to the Labour Party as Mosley

---

1. T.C., 30;10;1931.
2. T.C., 13;11;1931.
3. T.C., 4;6;1920.
4. King's Norton Labour News, February, 1930.
5. ibid.
6. Birmingham Parliamentary Election Literature, BCL; Erdington, 1929.

and Strachey, Wilson and Ponsonby. On one level, such high status converts were seen as demonstrating the truth of Labour's contention that it was a non-class party whose idealism and good sense would ultimately win over people from all strata of society. At another, more psychological than political, feelings of working-class pride mixed with good old-fashioned deference. Pride was fortified by the fact that these prestigious converts had come over to their side, the side of the workers; deference by the genuine self-confidence and supposed talents of leadership and administration that the converts possessed.

On the other hand, as argued earlier, Labour's advance rested principally on its claim, and on its being seen, to better represent working-class interests than any other party. Against these professions of political piety should be set the realities of Labour's electoral practice. Labour's working-class candidates, who still formed by far the largest proportion of its representatives, repeatedly stressed that their fitness for office rested on their first-hand knowledge of working-class conditions. The manifesto of Charles Auger in the municipal elections of 1925 epitomises this approach:[1]

> In offering myself for election, I desire to say that my only credential is that of a Working Man who has known what it is to work for a livelihood ever since the age of 11 years. The majority of the residents of Ladywood Ward are working people, and it is because I believe that the experiences I have gained in the Labour and Trade Union movement will be a service to my own class that I offer myself as a Labour candidate.

In Sheffield, Cllr. Frank Thraves said that he had 'no desire to represent those who cannot be classed as workers'.[2]

These attitudes could slide easily into a form of inverted snobbery. After the disappointment of the defections of Mosley and Strachey, doubts

---

1. Birmingham Municipal Election Literature, BCL; Ladywood, 1925.
2. S.D.I., 1;11;1921.

about the trustworthiness of upper-class converts lacking 'groundings in the work and struggles of the movement' came to the fore.[1] The Town Crier was quick to emphasise the working-class origins of Tom May (Strachey's successor as Labour candidate in Aston):[2]

> He cannot claim Eton or Harrow or Oxford or Cambridge as his Alma Mater. But he can claim to have been educated in the hard school of experience.

Insofar as Labour possessed a theory of class, it espoused a broadly dichotomous class model of society. In the words of a Sheffield Labour activist, 'From the Labour point of view, there were only two classes - those who lift and those who lean'.[3] To Will Chamberlain, Labour was 'the People's Party...fighting the battle of the People against the profiteers and sweaters and slum-owners and rack-renters and war-mongers'.[4] Two fundamental ambiguities with important consequences for Labour's theory and practice resulted from the vagueness of this analysis. The first lay in Labour's appraisal of the middle-class role in politics. As a result of its deeply held rationalism and 'faith in the possibilities of human nature', Labour was unable to come to terms with middle-class opposition to its programme. Arnold Freeman believed that it was 'only the cowardice and snobbery of the middle classes' which prevented them supporting Labour.[5] Labour's class analysis was designedly not rigorous enough to exclude middle-class interests but neither was it sophisticated enough to include them. If 'class' was a hazy concept in Labour terminology, 'status' was a non-existent one and, despite its good intentions, Labour failed to comprehend those parts of the middle-class value-system that blocked its progress.

The criticism, however, more often levelled at the Labour Party was

---

1. T.C., 6;3;1931.
2. T.C., 29;5;1931.
3. S.D.I., 27;6;1923.
4. T.C., 3;11;1922.
5. S.D.I., 28;11;1923.

that it failed to mobilise its 'natural' working-class constituency. The working class was perceived as an essential base of Labour politics but not as an active agent of change. Labour's commitment to moral and intellectual conversion and its disavowal of the means of class struggle were rarely qualified. When Jim Simmons argued against any attempt to apply Bolshevik methods in Britain, he urged that 'there was no short cut to Socialism; it could only come through years of hard work in educating the people up to its principles'.[1] In consequence, Labour treated working-class consciousness as an essentially passive phenomenon and it rejected as a means to socialism, both theoretically and practically, the rapid radicalisation of the working class that might result from their involvement in political or economic dispute. The 'dialectic' is probably more properly assessed in its role as a political myth than by its 'scientific' validity or otherwise, but it did give the Communists a sense of dynamic change more constructive than the naive evolutionism common in Labour circles.

Labour's dependence on 'making socialists' as its sole strategy of political transformation also brought deep disillusionment when change was slow or regressive. Though, in most regards, Labour activists tried to see the best in human nature, they were seldom in any doubt about one of its chief vices - gullibility. Public opinion was viewed as almost entirely the product of capitalist manipulation. In Unionist Birmingham, the frustration of Will Chamberlain was perhaps understandable when he wrote:[2]

> The task of educating our fellows in the face of the mass propaganda methods of the anti-Labour forces in control of the Press, the Pulpit, the Pub and every other instrument capable of being used in their attacks on Labour is...almost hopeless at times.

But, while some gave way to resignation in the face of the apparently overwhelming forces arrayed against them, others turned against those they

---

1. T.C., 6;2;1920.
2. T.C., 17;9;1920.

were out to help. 'Socialist', writing in the King's Norton Labour News, allowed contempt and conceit to mix in unhealthy measure with the obvious anguish he felt in the bleak days of 1931. It's hardly a typical passage but it's worth quoting at length as an illustration of the more troubled side of Labour's relationship with its class:[1]

> I know a man to whom the fortunes of a certain football team are of more absorbing interest than any Government legislation against Trade Unions; to whom the fortunes of a certain centre forward are of greater concern than any municipal election...
> Of the causes of crime, disease, degradation, and famine, he is completely ignorant. He does not want to know. He is content. He wallows in his ignorance...
> Imagine a wall of solid rock, a hundred yards thick, a hundred yards long, and a hundred yards high...in my more despairing moments, I liken the mind of a large section of my class to that wall.
> It rears itself up like some hideous monster, and blots out all hope and sunshine. It rears itself up and grins at you, grins cynically, maddeningly, sickeningly...
> The Wall! You are under the Wall!!
> The Wall is there and on the other side is Socialism...
> What are we to do, we who have seen the light?

And there, in that final sentence, lay both the source of 'Socialist's' anger and its consolation - anger that the vision which he had caught could be ignored and denied by others, consolation that he had caught the vision just as others surely would in the future.

For the more zealous adherents of the Cooperative Commonwealth, there was a sense of election which was not diminished and might, indeed, be augmented by their Party's more secular failures in contemporary elections. Alfred Barratt Brown warned the socialist convert that their faith would:[2]

> mean no easy life - it will mean the opposition of every selfish interest, the contempt of worldly men, unpopularity, perhaps imprisonment and persecution; but it will mean something all men can do to you - the fellowship of loyal comrades, the joy of serving a great Cause, and the triumphant certainty that though you fail time and time again, the Cause cannot fail in the end, because it is the hope of the world, and the gates of Hell cannot prevail against it.

In these quasi-religious and hyperbolic terms, Barratt Brown expressed a

---

1. King's Norton Labour News, November, 1931.
2. T.C., 4;6;1920.

basic sentiment, widely held in the Labour movement, that their cause was right and that right would win out. It was a sentiment that gave heart even, or perhaps especially, in Tory-dominated Birmingham where Will Chamberlain was always eager to assure Party workers, should their spirits flag, that even the 'stars in their courses' were fighting on the side of Labour.[1] Given Labour's appalling electoral record in Birmingham, it must have been reassuring, if not always convincing, to learn that:[2]

> whatever temporary hindrances the Labour movement can experience, it can never experience defeat. Its onward march is as inevitable as the march of Time.

In Sheffield, of course, such reassurances were not so necessary and the Party even had the audacity to admit, in 1930, that it had perhaps reached the plateau of its support and further advance could not realistically be expected.[3] In Birmingham, such talk would have savoured of sacrilege and would have seemed a denial of the very hopes which motivated and sustained the Labour Party's arduous struggle. In this, as in much else, the Labour activists of Sheffield could afford to be more matter-of-fact. Pointedly, the exception to this was in Hallam where, after his defeat in the 1929 General Election, the Labour candidate, Basil Rawson, was quick to point out that 'the result of the fight, apart from the numerical result, had been a Socialist victory' because of the new converts won to the cause.[4]

Two factors gave practical edge and impetus to Labour's frequently proclaimed belief in its final certain victory. One, at least up to 1931, was the constant incremental rise in the Party's popular vote. The other was the perceived growth of socialism in practice through the rise of municipal enterprise and state intervention. The Labour candidate in the Ecclesall municipal by-election in 1924:[5]

---

1. T.C., 17;9;1920.
2. T.C., 31;10;1924.
3. SFTLC minutes, 'Report on result of Municipal Elections, November, 1930', 17;1;1931.
4. S.D.I., 31;5;1929.
5. S.D.I., 31;10;1924

> urged her hearers not to be afraid of Labour or socialism. Socialism was already in operation in many things, including the trams, the electric supply, the water and the schools, and they only wanted to get the other things by a gradual process of evolution.

Socialism not only would work, it did work and Labour supporters could not believe that the principles of common ownership and communal control so successfully applied locally and applied unavoidably during the War would not be extended as the failure of free-market capitalism became increasingly undeniable.[1]

The keystone of Labour's political philosophy was its commitment to the conversion to socialism of a majority of the population. The methodological corollary to this was a virtually unshakeable allegiance to the electoral road to power; parliamentary government seemed the best and fairest instrument of majority rule, while the individual ballot seemed to represent in microcosm the process of rational and conscious choice that ought to underlie representative government.

It is, however, worth recording one exception to this generalisation. In 1919, the Attercliffe branch of the ILP urged its national leadership to adopt a more radical constitution and it suggested that all references to 'Commonwealth' in the Party's programme be deleted and replaced by the words 'Soviet Republic'. The Attercliffe branch further argued that the constitution should state openly that the ILP was a 'revolutionary political organisation' whose ultimate object was the establishment of a 'socialist Soviet Republic'.[2] But the branch hardly reflected this revolutionism in its actual political practice. It continued to actively support the Labour Party and went so far as to support unanimously a proposal that Cecil Wilson (who was certainly not a revolutionary) should stand as Labour's

---

1. King's Norton Labour News, November, 1929.
2. Attercliffe ILP minutes, 15;1;1919.

parliamentary candidate in Attercliffe.[1] Without wishing to belittle the genuine radicalism and militancy which fired Labour's supporters in the immediate post-war years, it is clear that Attercliffe's commitment to Soviet principles owed more to enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution and rhetorical excess than it did to any real support for, or understanding of, Bolshevik ideology. Certainly, it is the case that, though a few members of the branch subsequently joined the Communist Party, most remained active in the Labour Party, and on the dissolution of the branch in 1923 its funds and resources were donated en bloc to the local Labour Party.[2] The episode was an exception to the Labour movement's constitutionalism which, in fact, proved the rule.

Labour's committed adherence to electoralism and 'bourgeois' democracy has been criticised by many, but, by its own criteria, these were the ideal means by which to achieve its genuinely democratic ends. As a matter of principle, Labour wished to spread and share its ideology; it wanted to represent the majority by their own volition and sanction and did not conceive that it could rule 'objectively' in their interests while, in fact, being opposed by the mass of the population.

Against the Communist critique that the State was in capitalist hands and would remain so even after Labour had won a parliamentary majority, Labour reaffirmed its belief in the power and legitimacy of education alone to overcome capitalist opposition. Ernest Green, editor of the Sheffield Forward, argued:[3]

> That the capitalists have captured all the machinery which governs the "State" is undeniable but that is entirely the fault of the Henry Dubbs who acquiesce every time they have a chance to vote... And any Labour Government returned would realize that when it had obtained office, its next step must be to obtain power, and that could come only as they found themselves backed by an educated, intelligent democracy.

---

1. Attercliffe ILP minutes, 11;8;1919.
2. ibid., 29;9;1922; 22;4;1923.
3. S.F., September, 1923.

The case was put even more explicitly by the Selly Oak ILP in a discussion of the likelihood of revolution in Britain:[1]

> The general trend of opinion was that any real attempt by a Socialist government to adopt Socialist legislation would be resisted violently by the Capitalist class and their dependents.

But this gloomy assessment did not lead to notions of armed workers and revolutionary justice. Instead:[2]

> The conclusion was drawn that the only safeguard against such a happening lay in the work of the ILP and in ceaseless propaganda to create Socialists.

Labour's belief in political rationalism and, more particularly, in the sense of fair play of the British upper classes was overwhelming and enabled the Party to sidestep a real and worthwhile issue raised by the Marxists in their concentration on the non-accountable but ultimately decisive economic power held in private hands. Labour ignored the very real problems it would face in any attempted transition to socialism and turned the argument (admittedly with the complicity of not a little posturing revolutionism by some in the Communist Party) into one between the advocates and opponents of force. Labour stood four-square behind the methods of peaceful persuasion and justified its position by both moral and practical arguments. Percival Bower, a Labour alderman in Birmingham, reiterated a point widely made in Labour circles:[3]

> if we cannot convince our class to fire ballot papers into the ballot box in support of men and women from their own ranks, we shall not get them to face machine guns.

In any case, it would be an uneven contest; 'pocket knives against aircraft and resolutions against mustard gas', according to one Birmingham activist.[4] Ernest Green concluded his defence of Labour's strategy with a sharp attack on Bolshevik tactics:[5]

---

1. T.C., 23;8;1929.
2. ibid.
3. T.C., 5;8;1921.
4. Letter from Walter Hill, T.C., 19;11;1920.
5. S.F., September, 1923.

> You cannot transform the "Proletariat" by giving them a gun instead of a vote. If they were as skilful with the gun as they have been with the vote, God help the men behind as well as those in front... Education is the only weapon which can destroy capitalism and make freedom possible. Not the freedom of the Communist armed coup, freedom forced by authority and enforced by brutality but freedom obtained by sanction of majority opinion and made secure by the voice of the majority.

In our period, Labour made just one exception to its proscription of direct action and it occurred, with a certain irony, not in the General Strike which (despite Government propaganda) was never anything more than a sympathetic action on behalf of the miners, but in defence of the Russian Revolution. In August, 1920, the threat of British intervention on the side of Poland in its war with Soviet Russia led to an unparalleled display of working-class opposition. 'Councils of Action' sprang up throughout the country with the object of pursuing a down-tools policy should war become likely. The upsurge may have been actuated chiefly by a repulsion against the idea of war itself but the political implications of a deeply unpopular right-wing Government taking action against the only socialist country in the world were not lost on the mass of workers. For once, Labour could seize the initiative, knowing that it was leading a popular crusade against a Government whose legitimacy was doubted and whose policies were profoundly distrusted. As Gertrude Wilkinson, president of the Sheffield Federated Trades and Labour Council, put it:[1]

> If they found themselves in the hands of autocrats who were prepared to enter into commitments and then lie to the House of Commons and the country, then action had to be taken.

Labour felt itself on sure ground because, as well as speaking for a genuine fear of renewed war, it could also claim to be defending the democratic process - both in this country and, it was thought, in Russia.

---

1. S.D.I., 25;8;1920.

The years 1919 and 1920 saw the high-water mark of direct actionism in the British Labour movement. Lloyd George's massive Coalition majority was felt to result from an electoral confidence trick, subsequently exposed by the reactionary policies pursued by the Government since the election. The impotence and ineffectualness of Labour's small parliamentary Opposition increased the frustrations of the Labour movement's rank and file, while social and economic circumstances were unusually favourable to the possibilities of militant working-class action. But, even at this juncture, Labour did not seek to undermine parliamentary democracy but sought rather to defend and extend it. In 1919, the Birmingham Borough Labour Party was at its most militant in demanding that the Labour Party and the TUC call a general strike but, as the text of its resolution makes clear, it wanted to safeguard the parliamentary road, not by-pass it:[1]

> the British Government and Parliament, having broken their pledges given at the General Election, having treated the will of the people with contempt, and now having made open war on trades unionism and liberty of opinion by their new Police Act, there remains only one legitimate and peaceful method by which democracy can maintain its authority - namely a general strike.

At best, direct action was conceived of as a reactive and corrective measure rather than a constructive one.[2]

Labour's ethical socialism and its deeply ingrained constitutionalism led to an optimistic, and perhaps naive, assessment of the possibilities for uncontested change in Britain's capitalist economy and parliamentary democracy. Its socialism could not give it the grasp of realpolitik necessary to transform its dreams of change into a machinery of change. But, if Labour did fail, it failed through the defects of its virtues, through its trust of the people and its unwillingness ever to go against or beyond their aspirations.

---

1. National Labour Party archives, JSM/STR/24; Enclosed in letter from F.W. Rudland to Arthur Henderson, 15;8;1919.
2. See: J.E. Southall in T.C., 3;10;1919.

7.4 Labour's Politics

Labour's constitutionalism found its political reflection in the Party's strategy of social and economic transition. By its commitment to the democratic process and rational persuasion, Labour had no option but to campaign for and stand on a policy of piecemeal reform. Labour was a reformist party; the nature of its ethos and ideology, the circumstances of its birth and growth, ensured that it could never be and would never desire to be anything else.

It was this fundamental and pervasive reformism that held the Party together and gave it its rationale and momentum. Whatever the deeper differences of ideology and goal which divided the Party's membership, all could unite around the basic objective of reform. To some that came into the Party from the trade union side, their adhesion to Labour might signify little more than a commitment to the practical but limited improvement of working-class conditions; their support of the Party rested on its representation of class interests and its programme of state and municipal action. To others, committed to a vision of the Cooperative Commonwealth, the Labour Party was a necessary but inadequate vehicle towards that distant goal. But because it was a distant goal, because they sought to educate and win over the electorate in the meanwhile, and because, basically, they were working-class activists with working-class interests at heart, the socialists too were pledged to the immediate and concrete amelioration of working-class circumstances. Thus it was that the Labour movement as a whole could unite behind the cause of workers engaged, even for the most materialistic of reasons, in industrial action. Thus it was that Eli Stevens, a right-wing official of the National Society of Brass and Metal Mechanics, and Percy Shurmer, a left-wing socialist, could campaign with equal sincerity and zeal for lighting in the courts of their working-class

constituents. In the rambling structure of Labour Party belief, class interest and class sympathy were the cement and reform, the basic building material.

As regards Labour's specific proposals, except insofar as they required conscious ameliorative intervention by the national and local authorities, they could rarely be described as socialist; they were concerned to remedy the practical problems and deficiencies of the status quo and only rarely threatened its fundamentals. National policies, with scarce exceptions, were handed down from above - the membership campaigned on the nationalisation of the mines and railways, the capital levy and suchlike, as the leadership and Conference determined. It is perhaps, therefore, in local politics that the true nature of the Labour rank and file's socialism is best seen, and in this respect, though their proximity to political power was at wide variance, the Birmingham and Sheffield Labour movements were as one.

Labour fought for concrete, limited improvements in working-class life. The abolition of privy middens and fixed ashpits occupied a far more prominent place in its programmes than did dreams of universal brotherhood and peace; its electoral appeal and call to action was based on the need for more houses, better health care and more efficient municipal services. Insofar as these proposals added up to any uniform or comprehensive programme, they sought (in the words of the Sheffield Labour Party's municipal election manifesto in 1920):[1]

> a Healthier City, the Abolition of Slumdom and Poverty, equal Opportunities for All, and the lot of all working men, women and children made far happier and brighter than it has been in the past.

Of 217 Labour local election addresses retained by Birmingham Central Library from the period 1919-1931, just 18 made a specific verbal

---

1. Newspaper Cuttings Relating to Sheffield, vol. 22, SCL.

commitment to socialism; the others were dominated by the immediate demands and issues before the electorate. The most ideological of the policies regularly proclaimed in the manifestos was Labour's support for the principle of municipal enterprise and direct labour - one third of the Birmingham addresses made reference to this.

This practicality was, of course, Labour's strength; it was the point at which its socialism moved from that never-never land of hope and vision to become real, practicable and appealing in the eyes of many ordinary members of the working class. At the parliamentary level, the major part of the Parliamentary Labour Party's work, which lay in the support and furtherance of sympathetic state action to improve working-class living standards, was simply this practical reformism writ large. Though there were differences in emphasis and style between the Labour leadership and the Party's membership in the country, it would be mistaken to juxtapose these two elements in any simple opposition.

If, however, we are to judge the Labour Party by its failure to achieve socialism (not, it should be stated, an unusual failure), it must be admitted that the Party's reformism manifested one marked failing - it lacked an applicable strategy for the economic reform of capitalism. Labour showed some skill at the national and, more particularly, at the local level in treating the symptoms of capitalism's pathology, but it left their root cause untouched.

There were two basic elements in the Labour Party's economic thinking. One comprised essentially a refusal of economic thought and amounted to a belief that, when the electorate was sufficiently educated to support socialism, problems of production and distribution would be easily solved by the simple application of human rationality. It was expressed

very plainly by Jim Simmons who stated that:[1]

> If the wealth producers owned the means of production, they would own the wealth when it was produced and control the distribution of that wealth, thus solving the poverty problem.

The actual mechanics of socialist ownership and planning remained, to say the least, obscure and, though other writers recognised the omission and sought to remedy it, their solutions do not seem capable of easy translation into functioning reality. Fred Longden envisaged that it would be possible under socialism:[2]

> to place into the hands of the technical and other worker staffs the internal management of the industries in which they work. Each industry would be linked up with every other centrally. The consumers also would be organised, and there would be periodic consultations between the two central authorities.

It is easy to sympathise with those, inspired or even dazzled by a vision of socialism, who lacked the incentive or ability to plan the nuts and bolts of the new social order they desired. Indeed, to many, even to have attempted to do so would have been to demonstrate a lack of faith in the possibilities of human nature and an unhealthily 'materialistic' turn of mind. Belief in socialism, bolstered by a certainty of its inevitability, was sufficient.

The other broad element in the Labour Party's economics was based on the underconsumptionist analysis of capitalism and sought to transform the capitalist economy through control of its demand side. From this common starting point, a number of strands developed. That which had the widest impact among Labour's rank and file was the 'Living Wage' programme put forward by the ILP in the mid-1920s. In this, it was proposed that a future Labour Government should lay down statutory regulations enforcing a high wage policy throughout industry; those industries which were unable or unwilling to implement the necessary increases would be forced to re-organise or, if sufficiently important, be nationalised. It was an

---

1. Simmons Papers, vol. 6; Lecture notes on 'Keir Hardie's Socialism'.
2. F. Longden, Why This Unemployment? A Socialist View of Its Origin and Solution (1924), p. 10.

attractive plan to many in the Labour Party, combining as it did the concrete appeal of high wages with their longer-term hopes for the socialisation of the banks and industry, and it received widespread support both in the ILP and in the main body of the Party itself. The Birmingham Borough Labour Party was among the more important groups to endorse its proposals.[1]

The policy which had particular impact in Birmingham, however, and to which the city even gave its name was the plan for credit and currency control espoused by Oswald Mosley and John Strachey in the so-called 'Birmingham Proposals'. These too urged that socialist attempts to take control of industry should be supported by a policy to increase effective demand by augmenting workers' incomes. They went further, however, in arguing that the initial increase in national demand should be effected by the distribution of producers' credits, made possible by the public ownership and control of the Bank of England and the five main joint-stock banks.[2]

In the preface to his exposition of the Proposals, John Strachey gave the initial credit for their formulation to Mosley but he went on to say that they were 'much discussed and considerably developed...by both the Birmingham Borough Labour Party and the ILP Federation'.[3] In attempting to assess the real input of the local Labour movement, it is important to bear in mind, first of all, Mosley's dominating and charismatic personality and his desire to build up a local power-base for his policies and career. Mosley was anxious to flatter the Birmingham Labour movement and suggested at an early stage that it should develop its own policies and return its own 'ginger group' of M.P.s to further their enactment.[4] With hindsight,

---

1. BBLP minutes, 13;9;1928.
2. J. Strachey, Revolution by Reason (1925).
3. ibid., p. viii.
4. T.C., 12;9;1924.

perhaps unfairly, this would seem to have been primarily a means of securing a wider influence for his own ideas and role. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that both the Ladywood ILP and the Birmingham ILP Federation passed resolutions for the nationalisation of banking and the public control of credit in the weeks before Mosley's adoption as Labour candidate in Ladywood.[1] There would, then, appear to have been some genuine cross-fertilisation of ideas, and, when the Proposals came before the Borough Labour Party, there was a real debate as to their worth. A section of the Party was distrustful of Mosley's scheme, claiming it was designed to bolster up capitalism rather than take contol of the means of production which they deemed the authentic socialist solution to the problems of capitalism. In the event, though, the persuasive abilities of Mosley and Strachey won the day and the Proposals were endorsed by 65 votes to 14.[2] Thenceforth, Mosley could fairly claim the support of the Birmingham movement for his proposals while the local movement could legitimately feel some sense of proprietorial interest in their progress. How far the ordinary member comprehended or went along with their more sophisticated reasoning must remain a moot point, though the position of Will Chamberlain, who supported the Proposals because they appeared 'to his lay mind to be based on common sense and practicability', was probably not atypical.[3]

To a large extent, the adoption of such specific economic policies depended on the initiative of forceful individuals. Mosley's predecessor in Ladywood, Dr. Robert Dunstan, was an enthusiast for the confiscation of the land and its restoration (on lease) to its rightful owners, the agricultural workers. It seems an unlikely policy for the Birmingham

---

1. T.C., 27;6;1924; 11;7;1924.
2. T.C., 10;7;1925; BBLP minutes, 11;6;1925; 2;7;1925.
3. T.C., 11;12;1925.

movement to take up but it led briefly to the establishment of a Birmingham Land Restoration Committee and received the endorsement of the Borough Labour Party and the ILP Federation.[1] Subsequently, interest in land restoration faded as quickly as Dunstan's influence in the local movement declined. In the same way, the Birmingham Proposals took a back seat once Mosley's local role diminished and his own political interests moved to other fields. An analogous instance from the Sheffield Labour movement is provided by the temporary support given by the City Council Labour Group to Cllr. Alfred Barton's scheme for a municipal currency in 1919.[2] Nothing further was heard of the plan when, seven years later, Labour assumed office.

It seems fair to conclude that the average Labour Party member's interest in practical economics was slight and his approach to concrete proposals complaisant. The economic weakness of Labour's anti-capitalist critique was matched, in the vast majority of its supporters, by the almost complete lack of serious thinking on the means towards socialist transition. The only excuse for this was that, in the interwar period, Labour never formed a majority government. This, to most people in the Party, also excused a great deal else.

There was, however, a section in the Labour movement who did not find this excuse convincing. They felt that the plea of Labour's minority position, the argument that not until the Party had the backing of a socialist majority in the country could it take radical action, was being used as a cloak to conceal what were, in fact, the genuinely right-wing and reactionary propensities of those in the leadership.

The ILP was always the principal base of the more radical elements in the Party but it was supplemented by a number of other ad hoc bodies

---

1. T.C., 22;6;1923; 19;10;1923; BBLP minutes, 27;3;1923.
2. A. Barton, The Burden of Interest and How to Avoid It (Sheffield, 1920); S.D.I., 10;12;1919.

used by left-wingers to organise and publicise their position. The Councils of Action founded in Birmingham and Sheffield were one such body. Though initially an organ of the entire Movement, they came, as the immediate threat of hostilities declined, to be a powerful vehicle of left-wing propaganda and prescriptions. The Birmingham Council of Action, with its resolutions in November, 1920 calling for a general strike to enforce both trade with Russia and peace in Ireland, was one of the most radical in the country and, under the peculiar circumstances of the time, achieved a marked degree of influence within the local Movement.[1] The work of the Councils of Action was backed up by the 'Hands Off Russia' Committees founded in both cities in 1919.[2] Again, it was that in Birmingham which had the longer and more radical existence, continuing to issue pro-Soviet propaganda, while increasingly dominated by the Communists, until 1924.[3] One other vehicle of the Party's left-wing in Birmingham, one which appears not to have been replicated in Sheffield, was the Herald League (initially established to promote Lansbury's daily newspaper) which claimed to be a forum where 'Labour men and Socialists of all shades of opinion will find a common platform'.[4] The Birmingham branch stood well to the left of the Party's mainstream and was eventually dissolved by the paper's management in 1927 by which time it had become almost entirely a vehicle of Communist intervention.[5]

Whilst it would be unfair and erroneous to treat these manifestations of dissent from orthodox Labour politics as the result of 'extremist' manipulation, it is true to say that in the early 1920s they represented a

---

1. BTC minutes, Council of Action 12;11;1920; 18;11;1920; National Labour Party archives, CA/GEN/748, CA/GEN/757, CA/GEN/786; letters from F.W. Rudland, 18;11;1920; 19;11;1920; 23;11;1920.
2. Sheffield ILP minutes, 24;11;1919; T.C., 28;11;1919.
3. T.C., 11;7;1924; 28;11;1924.
4. T.C., 4;11;1921.
5. BBLP minutes, 28;11;1922; 18;9;1924; 29;8;1927.

strand of Labour politics which was fairly small and isolated. The strand received impetus, however, from the conduct of the 1924 Labour Government. While most in the Party took pride in the MacDonald Government's responsible and 'statesmanlike' direction of policy, the more uncompromising socialists condemned the style of Labour's administration. The Birmingham ILPer, Joseph Southall, wrote that:[1]

> Amid banquets and garden parties, ceremonies and obsequious bowings (to the infinite amusement of the aristocracy) we played at being imperial statesmen and gentlemen...Labour had literally been knocked into a cocked hat.

To those on the Left, the court-dress and the hob-nobbing with the upper classes symbolised a drift by Labour away from its class roots and instincts. To them, Labour was being 'Liberalised', it was becoming middle-class and 'respectable'.[2]

The National Left-Wing Movement represented a response to these misgivings. As a national movement, it existed primarily as an instrument of Communist policy towards the Labour Party but at the local level it did reflect an authentic rank and file reaction to trends in Labour politics. This was particularly the case in Birmingham where a number of specifically local issues gave point and momentum to the wider fears of right-wing treachery. In fact, the Birmingham Left-Wing Group was founded one year before the national organisation at a meeting in December, 1924 at which the main speakers were Southall, Jim Simmons, Fred Longden and Percy Shurmer.[3] The issue which became the principal focus of left-wing dissent in Birmingham was the question of Labour's reaction to the candidature of Dr.

---

1. J.E. Southall, 'Margate and the Left Wing', Labour Monthly, 8, 10, (October, 1926).
   Southall was a well-known artist and a cousin of George Cadbury Jr. As a Quaker, he was a committed pacifist but he combined this conviction with a militant left-wing politics. He remained an officer of the Birmingham City branch of the ILP until his death in 1941. See also: J. Bellamy, J. Saville (eds), Dictionary of Labour Biography, vol 5 (1979), pp. 200-05.
2. Leaflet of Sheffield Labour Party Provisional Left-Wing Committee, April, 1926 (In possession of Mr. W. Moore).
3. T.C., 5;12;1924.

Robert Dunstan in West Birmingham. Dunstan had resigned from the Labour Party in July, 1924 and had joined the Communist Party. He was immediately repudiated as Labour's candidate for Ladywood and Oswald Mosley was adopted his successor just four days later.[1] Dunstan then seized the opportunity provided by a vacancy in West Birmingham (where the Divisional Labour Party had recently decided to replace the ageing Frank Smith) to stand as an unofficial 'Workers' Candidate'. Labour was unable and unwilling to field an opponent in the 1924 General Election and Dunstan had secured over 7000 votes.

There is no doubt that Dunstan, who was a popular figure in Labour circles in Birmingham, enjoyed the support of a large number of Party members and the decision, in March, 1925, to adopt an official Labour candidate in the West Birmingham constituency was widely resented.[2] Prominent Labour activists continued to support Dunstan until, ultimately, the Borough Labour Party moved to threaten expulsions. At this point, the conflict erupted into a wider crisis when Joseph Southall published an article in the Sunday Worker, luridly headlined:[3]

> Two Rich Men Who Control a Local Labour Party
> How Wealthy Employers Plan Dictatorship

In it, he alleged that the trouble in West Birmingham arose from the attempts of George Cadbury Jr. and Harrison Barrow (appearing under the soubriquets 'Mr. A' and 'Mr. B') to foist their own pliant candidate and right-wing policies on the rank and file. Their influence was all the more sinister because:[4]

> a local newspaper (nominally Labour), the Town Crier, is heavily subsidised by A, and most of the salary of the local organiser comes from the same source, and the rent of his office is paid by B.

---

1. B.G., 15;7;1924; Birmingham Despatch, 19;7;1924.
2. B.P., 13;3;1925.
3. Sunday Worker, 20;11;1927.
4. ibid.

This, to Southall, was evidence that 'capitalists and their retainers' were seeking 'to buy up and control the Workers' Party'.

Southall and others continued to oppose the official Labour candidate in West Birmingham and continued to use the columns of the Sunday Worker to expose the right-wing machinations apparently corrupting the Birmingham Labour Party.[1] At the end of 1927, this behaviour led to their expulsion from the Labour Party.[2] When two Divisional Labour Parties, Moseley and Edgbaston, refused to implement this decision, their disaffiliation duly followed and new loyal parties were established in their stead.[3] After this, the dissension in the Birmingham movement quietened though it found a lingering echo in the candidature of George Bridgen as an unofficial 'Left-Wing Labour' candidate for Moseley in the 1929 General Election. (Ironically, Dunstan, whose candidature in West Birmingham had sparked off the whole dispute, was withdrawn and he stood as a Communist candidate in South-West Bethnal Green.)

It is worthwhile attempting to put this episode into some kind of perspective for it sheds valuable light on the nature of the Labour rank and file's politics and the platform of the Left. In the first place, it is clear that, though the pro-Dunstan elements were prominent enough to gain a lot of publicity, they represented, in fact, very much a minority current. The West Birmingham Divisional Labour Party consistently rejected any concessions to Dunstan and his supporters and, as the advocates of the orthodox position always pointed out, the latter came from outside the Division.[4] It is also significant that the two parties expelled came from from the most middle-class areas of Birmingham, it being a legitimate inference that these parties were the weakest and the most open to

---

1. Sunday Worker, 4;12;1927; 11;12;1927; 10;2;1928; 25;3;1928.
2. BBLP minutes, 28;11;1927; 8;12;1927.
3. BBLP minutes, 14;6;1928; 20;6;1928; 21;6;1928.
4. BBLP minutes, 31;5;1926; 9;6;1926.

domination by small numbers. Even in these cases, two out of the three ward branches in each constituency were loyal to the Borough Labour Party.[1] The point to be made is not that the revolt was less than genuine but that it was small-scale.

One of the outstanding traits of the Labour Party was the loyalty accorded to the Movement's duly constituted leadership and procedures. Once an official candidate was properly selected and endorsed, the ordinary members felt honour-bound to give him or her their support. Thus both Jim Simmons and the secretary of the West Birmingham Divisional Party, who had formerly backed Dunstan's campaign, withdrew their backing once a Labour candidate had been selected.[2] This was both the cause and the effect of a situation in which the Left could easily be isolated as disruptionist and anti-democratic critics of the majority line. The Left went some way to confirming the operation of this factor by its own tendency to personalise issues and attack individuals. Labour supporters usually closed ranks against this sort of ad hominem criticism and a good deal of the Left's critique of leading personalities in the Party was counter-productive.

Perhaps more seriously for the Left, this style of attack reflected an inability to put forward a genuine alternative to Labour's contemporary strategy. A textual analysis of the official programme of the Birmingham Left-Wing Group illustrates this argument; its proclaimed purpose was:[3]

> To work for a peaceful revolution based on the class struggle, by a great change of opinion in the masses, and thus to replace Capitalism and Imperialism by Socialism and the Union of the Workers of the whole World. To establish peace and abolish standing armies, navies and Air Forces. To use both united industrial and political action. To give the worker the fruit of his toil and to end exploitation of man by man by the workers' control of industry. To insist on full and equal rights for the Communists as members of the Labour Party and control of the Parliamentary leaders by the rank and file.

---

1. BBLP minutes, 20;6;1928; 21;6;1928.
2. T.C., 10;4;1925; B.P., 13;3;1925.
3. B.P., 18;9;1925.

This was a curious jumble of a programme. It was certainly more 'class conscious' in its rhetoric, in its espousal of the class struggle and in its proposal of cooperation with the Communists. It was more 'radical' in the depth and range of its demands and its willingness to counter the use of industrial action for political ends. Yet, in the final analysis, its programme too depended ultimately on the conversion of a majority. As a result, the thrust of its attack on the Labour orthodoxy was blunted; for most Labour activists, the necessity remained the winning of converts and criticism of the leadership was idle and mischievous until such time as Labour commanded majority support in the country.

The Sheffield committee of the Left-Wing Movement was established at a conference attended by over 160 delegates in September, 1926. It was, though, far more the creation of national political dynamics and it appears to have led a moribund existence after the initial enthusiasm of its founding.[1] This would seem to be another instance where left-wing dissent was stronger in Birmingham than in Sheffield but, though correct on one level, such a judgment tends to ignore the deeper realities of the Sheffield movement. Organisations specifically of the Left were certainly less visible and active in Sheffield than in Birmingham but this was primarily because the Left had a greater role in the mainstream of the local movement. Working-class politics as a whole were stronger and more self-confident in the Yorkshire city and, in a context where Labour was rapidly rising to and then exercising power, differences between Right and Left were far more easily merged in an overall preoccupation with practical issues and policies. By contrast, in Birmingham the prospects of office were remote, frustrations were greater, and the room allowed and available to internal debate consequently larger. The political and financial weaknesses of the

---

1. S.F., October, 1926.

Birmingham Labour movement contributed to a situation in which personal and ideological differences assumed a greater importance and raised issues (such as those which came to the fore in the Dunstan affair concerning patronage and right-wing manipulation) which the greater strength and easier political cooperation of the Sheffield Movement largely precluded in the first place.

Left-wing dissent in the Party as a whole revived once more during the period of the Second Labour Government. Now, more than ever, the caution and orthodoxy of the Labour leadership was defended by reference to the Government's minority position and the need to win over, as yet, non-Labour voters. To many in the Party, these excuses were wearing thin. J.A. Aplin, the secretary of the Birmingham ILP Federation, expressed the Left's position well:[1]

> the stage of public propaganda work is now almost past, and the merits and demerits of the Socialist case will be judged by the success or otherwise of a Socialist Government. Success can only come in one way and that is not by being ultra-cautious, by continuous compromises with Capitalism or by fearing to grapple with great problems.

In practical terms, those that remained in the ILP signalled their criticism of the Government by supporting Maxton and the ILP Parliamentary Group in their policy of opposing Labour enactments which were held to undermine working-class conditions and rights. In both Birmingham and Sheffield, the majority of the ILP rank and file endorsed the Maxton line.[2] Those that did not had, of course, already distanced themselves from the ILP and included such prominent figures as Jim Simmons, Wilfrid Whiteley, Cecil Wilson and Arthur Ponsonby. John Strachey was the only local M.P. to join the 18-strong ILP Parliamentary Group.

---

2. T.C., 24;1;1930; Preliminary Agenda of Resolutions...ILP Conference, Birmingham, 1930, p. 22;
   SFTLC minutes, LP EC 21;7;1931.
1. T.C., 14;2;1930.

The ambiguity of its position which had plagued the ILP ever since the Labour Party had adopted the 1918 Constitution (with its socialist commitment and provision for individual membership) had now come home to roost. For a number of years, it had been sufficient to argue that the ILP's role was to propagandise while the Labour Party concerned itself with organisation and electoral work. As Will Chamberlain put it:[1]

> The function of the ILP is to make Socialists and to prepare the workers for the coming of Socialism. That work must of necessity be undertaken by men and women whose minds are clear on the fundamentals of socialism and whose activities are not mainly concerned with the equally necessary work of organising Labour opinion in the mass and translating it into votes at election times.

This was, in truth, never a convincing solution to the problem nor a practicable division of labour. The convinced socialists of the ILP wanted not only to secure the election of a Labour Government but to ensure that, once elected, it would carry out socialist policies. To this end, the ILP formulated and campaigned for its own plans of socialist reform including, most notably, those embodied in the 'Living Wage' and 'Socialism in Our Time' programmes. To the same end, it had come to believe that it should assert its independence and oppose the Labour Party when it seemed to be betraying its promises and ideals.

On the other hand, the Labour Party itself could never be a mere electoral machine. It determined and executed policy and in the eyes of many, including those whose political careers began in the ILP, it became, despite its acknowledged deficiencies, the real vehicle of socialist advance and the most important arena of political struggle. To such as these, any ILP criticism of a Labour Government could be construed as destructive. Jim Simmons pleaded with his former colleagues to avoid damaging complaints:[2]

---

1. T.C., 28;9;1923.
2. T.C., 29;5;1931.

> We are only going to get Socialism through a Labour Government and if we destroy the faith of the people in Labour representation, we have no hope of "Socialism in Our Time" or at any time.

The ILP's increasingly public and pointed criticism of leading Labour politicians also worked at another level to alienate many of its erstwhile supporters. To Cecil Wilson, it was evidence that:[1]

> the old spirit no longer exists, there is not the same high time, fault finding has taken the place of good feeling, there is little or no desire to find points of agreement but every desire to find points of difference and magnify them...
> However much I may differ from my colleagues either in the ILP or Labour Party, I want to give them credit for being as sincere in their point of view as I claim to be in mine, and so I will never hold them up to complaint or ridicule in public.

The behaviour of the ILP had offended not only the instinctive loyalism of the Labour movement but also, more deeply, those basic assumptions about the goodwill and good nature of man which informed its entire ideology and practice. To doubt the good intentions of one's allies was to negate the faith on which Labour's socialism was built. It is perhaps this woolly-minded humanism which explains why many on the Labour back benches and many more in Labour ranks up and down the country who would have classed themselves as good socialists continued to support MacDonald and the right-wing leadership even up to the day of their ultimate betrayal. The amiable vagueness of ethical socialism united those on the Left and Right of the Labour Party when it might have been expected that policy differences would divide them.

There were, however, those in the ILP whose disillusionment with the Labour Alliance was now almost complete. In 1929, when Joseph Southall had proposed the resolution of the Birmingham City branch for ILP disaffiliation from the Labour Party (on the grounds that Labour had now 'become the Imperialist Party') at the Midlands Divisional Conference, he was unable to find a seconder.[2] Two years later at the same venue, Southall moved

---

1. Francis Johnson Correspondence; Cecil Wilson to F. Jowett, 31;1;1930.
2. T.C., 1;2;1929.

a similar resolution on behalf of the Birmingham ILP Federation; when he advocated disaffiliation at the national conference of the party later that year, he could thus claim to be speaking on behalf of a majority of the ILP's active membership in Birmingham.[1] Sheffield ILP, however, took an opposing view and it proposed a resolution that the interests of socialism would be best furthered by the ILP 'seeking to extend its influence throughout the Labour and Trade Union movement'.[2] Many in Sheffield clung to this line even in 1932 when the ILP nationally voted for secession. Jean Thompson urged that:[3]

> There were many good individual Socialists in the Labour Party and the ILP should recognise the distinction between the late leadership and the rank and file. Their historic policy had been amazingly successful and the policies were not really different. To come out was not to be independent but to be in opposition to the Labour Party.

This was a shrewd assessment which gained considerably from the context of Sheffield where socialists had, through the Labour Party, gained power and achieved much practical good. To most, it must have seemed that to isolate themselves from the strategy which had made possible their gains thus far would be futile and self-defeating. In Birmingham, the same lessons had not been learnt and it seems likely, though actual statistics are impossible to come by, that a larger proportion of the ILP's local membership endorsed the national decision. In the event, time would reveal that the Labour Party, for all its failings, remained the principal hope for working-class advance in Britain.

---

1. T.C., 6;2;1931; ILP Annual Conference Report, 1931, p. 93.
2. Resolutions to be Submitted to Annual Conference of ILP, 1931, pp. 37-38.
3. Report of Special National Conference of ILP, July, 1932, p. 17.

7.5 Conclusion

There were so many components and layers of Labour Party thinking in the 1920s that it might seem artificial to judge them as any kind of unified whole. On the other hand, it has been argued that the points of view and practice held in common by Labour's constituent parts were more important than those which separated them. By the interwar period, 'Labour' was not merely a political label but a political party. The Labour Party had to present some common face to the electorate and it had inevitably to forge some common programme. It was on these that it was judged contemporarily and has been judged subsequently. In following this practice, we will attempt, in conclusion, to deal with a number of the key questions raised about Labour's politics in the interwar period.

The first is to what extent it is true to say, as so many have claimed, that the early socialists' ethical socialism was extinguished by the pressures and persuasions of electoral considerations. Insofar as ethical socialism is identified with an overtly spiritual religion of socialism, it was undoubtedly the case that, in its more other-worldly and and anti-political attitudes, it had declined. But Labour's practice - its stress on rationality and education - was taken over en bloc from the British socialist movement's founding fathers and remained unaltered. The real point is that ethical socialism and electoral politics did not interact, as sometimes assumed, in a straightforward relationship of antagonism. The ballot was, in fact, conceived as the instrument par excellence of an ethical socialism in which a numerical majority of the people recorded a conscious decision for socialism. Labour activists knew well enough that the operation of the ballot could be corrupted by outside

forces but to have rejected it as a means would have been to repudiate the possibilities and potential of that very rationality on which ethical socialism placed its hopes. Where it is fairer to say that ethical socialism was being superseded was in the way that conversion to socialism was being identified too readily with the mere fact of Labour voting. This did represent some cutting of corners and some betrayal of the original definitions of socialism but it would be wrong to lay all the blame at the door of the Labour Party's obsessive electoralism. Paradoxically, this decline of ethical socialism reflected one of its own chief failings - its over-optimistic appraisal of the democratic process and the meaning of popular participation within it. Labour's electoralism was not the subversion of some pure and unalloyed socialist inheritance but its fulfillment in all its virtues and failings.

The second and related question is on the impact of trades unionism. The trades unions have often been portrayed as a powerful anti-socialist force whose baleful influence was a major factor in Labour's failure to carry out its promises of radical change. How far is this assessment justified on the local evidence? In practice, it is difficult and often logically impossible to separate socialist and trades unionist currents in the Party. Most Labour Party members, the men especially, were active trades unionists and, by the 1920s, many trades union officials were socialists. As the pre-war generation of Liberal and Lib-Lab leaders was superseded, most union officials came to identify the Labour Party as the proper vehicle for their political ideals. At the same time, as a result of the War and post-war vicissitudes, these ideals were assuming a more radical and collectivist hue. Though most, though not all, trade union officials avoided socialist rhetoric and neglected the more visionary

aspects of Labour's appeal, trades unionists were no longer ashamed of calling themselves socialists. Their claim to this title might be disputed by some on the Left and their caution and orthodoxy could lead to internal Party differences but, at this juncture, it is more important to stress that trades union reformism, in its practice and effects, even in its more immediate objectives, was in no way distinguishable from socialist reformism Cooperation between these elements in the Party came naturally and neither side made great sacrifices.

As to Fabianism, at the local level it found no role and could claim no influence. Against those who would argue that the Labour Party was corrupted by the debilitating doctrines of the Fabian Society, the evidence from the localities is clear - Labour was cautious, gradualist and reformist without the help of Sidney Webb. Webb gave Labour's politics an intellectua gloss and respectability but did not alter their nature.

Like any party which is a genuine popular movement rather than a mere sect, Labour functioned as a coalition of ideas and attitudes, but it was a coalition evolving its own commanding identity. This is not to say that Labour's politics emerged as an outcome of competition between blocs. These blocs, as blocs, did not exist; there were socialist trades unionists, tentative socialists, ambitious reformists, timorous radicals - in short, a whole range of combinations and possibilities which defies pigeon-holing. There were, of course, differences of opinion and emphasis but what really impresses about the Labour Party in the 1920s is the extent to which assumptions and prescriptions were shared. All, from the far left to the far right, were committed to the same methods of attaining power. All agreed that the first task of Labour was to reform and improve the

conditions of the working class. As to ultimate ends, which were a long way off, there was room for variation but even here the congruence of most objectives and the amorphousness of some enabled an uncompromising cooperation. Whether represented by the gentle millenarianism of the ILP 'convert' or the practical interventionism of its councillors and politicians, whether proclaiming a vision of universal brotherhood or some limited industrial collectivism and small-scale reform, Labour succeeded in the end because it was a working-class party speaking to working-class needs and aspirations. So long as it was going forward, the deeper problems of its structure and beliefs could go unremarked.

Was Labour, therefore, a genuinely socialist party? The simple answer to this is that Labour was a socialist party because it said it was. No one group (despite the delusions of some) has yet copyrighted socialism and no one thinker or doctrine has the monopoly of political wisdom. However inadequate Labour's socialism may appear to those blessed with hindsight or superior theoretical insight, to its practitioners it was real and honest.

Chapter 8

THE LABOUR SUBCULTURE

8.1 Introduction

When Egon Wertheimer, the German socialist journalist, wrote about the Labour Party in the 1920s, one of the things that most concerned him was the almost complete lack of party life. The ILP and Women's Sections were partial exceptions, he observed, but 'in comparison with the German Social Democratic Party, the Labour Party [was] still a mere voting machine'.[1] This is a judgment that has remained substantially unaltered through the following decades. Stephen Yeo has written sympathetically about the socialist subculture which existed before the First World War but generally it has been assumed that by the 1920s changed cultural conditions and the dominance of Labour's electoral ambitions has effectively killed off the remnants of 'New Life' socialism.[2] There have, however, been few empirical studies to prove or disprove this thesis and those that have been carried out have mostly adopted a national perspective which has neglected the specific range and meaning of Labour activities in the local context which sustained them.[3]

In this section, we examine the Labour subculture of our two case-studies and attempt to assess its meaning and import for those who took part. To do this, we shall, so far as possible, judge Labour's group life not by what it might have been or should have been but by what it was and by what its practitioners wanted. The range of Labour's cultural and recreational activities could not match that of the German Social Democrats and it was certainly not 'hegemonic' but it did possess its own interest and validity.

---

1. E. Wertheimer, Portrait of the Labour Party (1929), p. 11.
2. S. Yeo, 'A New Life: the Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896', History Workshop Journal, 4, (Autumn, 1977).
3. D.L. Prynn, 'The Socialist Sunday Schools,the Woodcraft Folk and Allied Movements...', M.A. thesis, University of Sheffield, 1971;
   S.G. Jones, 'The British Labour Movement and Working-Class Leisure, 1918-1939', Ph. D. thesis, University of Manchester, 1983.

8.2 New Life Socialism

The principles of ethical socialism continued to shape not only the basic nature of Labour's politics in the interwar period but also the ethos and form of a substantial part of its non-electoral activity. Nowhere was this more clearly the case than in the Labour Churches which were not, as so often assumed, a purely pre-war phenomenon. In Birmingham, the number of Labour Churches rose from a total of six meeting regularly in 1920 to a peak of seventeen in 1925. Only at this point did their decline begin; by 1929, just four remained open and none survived the next few years.[1] In Sheffield however, the Churches were far weaker and only one is recorded - the Sheffield Christian Socialist Church which was operating in 1919.[2]

The Churches met - in a variety of venues but most often in school rooms and Cooperative halls - every Sunday evening in a winter session running from October to Easter and, though the tone and content of the meetings varied somewhat, their basic format was quite uniform. The evening opened with a song from the Labour Church hymn-book - 'England Arise', 'Lift Up the People's Banner', 'Jerusalem' and 'The Red Flag' were particular favourites. Then, the main part of the evening would be taken up by an address from a visiting speaker - usually some figure of prominence in the local Labour movement but occasionally a leading personality in national politics. As to the topics of the addresses, there was the utmost variation; principally, they were concerned with some issue of contemporary political interest, either locally or nationally, but there were a number of other talks on items ranging from foreign travel to poetry and art.[3] In most, there would be some reference to the spiritual side of Labour's work; even those speakers who dwelt on the most mundane of political issues usually

---

1. Calculated from notices in the Town Crier.
2. Labour Leader, 18;9;1919.
3. See Appendix G for a typical programme.

drew the moral that it was Labour which was fulfilling most nearly the teachings of the New Testament. The meeting would be concluded by the communal singing of another Labour hymn or two and, perhaps, by the performance of a musical item, a brief address or reading from the chair and a collection.[1] In all of this, the post-war Labour Churches of Birmingham followed almost exactly the pattern set by their predecessors of the 1890s.[2] Similarly, too, most Churches were organised by the local branches of the ILP though there was a tendency, as the twenties progressed, for their direction to be taken over by joint ILP and Labour Party committees or by independent ad hoc bodies.[3]

How, then, are we to interpret the Labour Churches? From many points of view, their role was undoubtedly primarily secular. They offered a form of meeting which enabled the dissemination of socialist propaganda on Sundays at a time when a different style might have offended conventional propriety. They were also a forum where speakers from the many sections of the working-class movement could come together and put forward their position Of these, most dealt with matters of current political debate and, insofar as they referred to the ethical values of socialism, these were adduced as adjuncts to the more concrete concerns of the main line of their argument. When ethical socialism was proclaimed, it was usually closely identified with the interests and programme of the Labour Party.

The Churches also offered, to the more earnest-minded of the working class, a good night-out - a combination of entertainment and self-improvement in roughly equal measure. The Balsall Heath Labour Church advertised its meetings thus:[4]

> An attractive programme is invariably arranged, including excellent vocal items, interesting readings, and addresses by prominent members

---

1. Interviews with Ted Smallbone and Lily Moody.
2. K.S. Inglis, Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England (1963) p. 234, pp. 241-47.
3. T.C., 12;8;1921; 24;9;1926; 15;4;1927.
4. Birmingham District Commonwealth, February, 1922.

> of progressive movements...anyone desiring to spend an hour in an educative manner would do well to give his Labour Church a trial.

Before the spread of the commercial mass media, the Churches clearly had a significant role to play in catering for the aptitudes and tastes of the respectable working class.

On the other hand, the very form of their meetings, reminiscent of those of the chapels which many of their visitors would also have attended, infused an air of spirituality into the proceedings. The singing of Labour hymns and even the act of singing in unison with comrades could not but give rise to a sense of religious feeling, encouraged by the inspirational nature of the hymns themselves. The Sparkhill and Tyseley Labour Church was particularly proud of its 'real useful Socialist Community Singing' and even compiled its own hymn-book and hymns, including the evocatively-titled 'Come, Workers of the World, Unite'.[1]

In general, it would be mistaken to look for the expounding of any uniform or theologically coherent religion of socialism from the pulpits of the Labour Churches. Insofar, as they possessed a common creed, it is best characterised as an idealistic, Christian-influenced humanism in which the role of the working class and its secular representative, the Labour Party, was given especial prominence. The main purpose of the Churches was avowedly propagandistic but it was a propaganda which stressed the religious aspect to Labour's cause and the spiritual worth of the individual activist and the movement to which he or she belonged. Indeed, the Churches made the movement seem real by imparting a sense of a unity of like-minded individuals and by reinforcing the message of humanity's ineluctable progress - and they could do this even while discussing the municipality's approach

---

1. T.C., 25;11;1927; 26;2;1926.
Sparkhill was also one of the more overtly religious of the Churches and proclaimed as its motto the text, 'For Christ and My Brother' (see T.C., 6;3;1925).

to sewage disposal! The great strength of the Labour Churches was that they blurred the frontiers of the secular-spiritual divide and gave an inspiration and meaning to political work lost in the more prosaic daily struggles. The enthusiast who wrote to the Town Crier in 1921 was unusual in the force of his feelings but he was certainly representing a widespread current of thought:[1]

> The Labour Church has given me something which the orthodox churches have failed to give - a contemplation of the things that matter, and rest for the soul, instead of the fantastical dogmas built up from mere assumption - sure ground for the feet...Believe me, after one or two attendances at the Labour Church, one really believes one has been standing on holy ground...And the Labour Church, more than any other branch of the people's cause, has in itself that spirit of fellowship and enthusiasm which will equip men for social service.

Given the value of their work, two questions arise: why did the Labour Churches decline so rapidly in the later 1920s, and why were there so few in Sheffield? One reason for their decline would seem to be that, with the spread of cinemas and wireless and with the growing acceptability of Sunday entertainments, the form of social outlet represented by the Churches grew increasingly outdated and unnecessary. At a deeper level, the state of the Churches seems to reflect the Labour Party's proximity to political power. The Churches were part of an earlier tradition of socialism in which the New Life was not merely to be won through the ballot box in the future but practised in the present. They were meetings of converts, essentially dedicatory and expressive in function, and Labour's advance to power nullified their role in two ways. By the late 1920s, Labour was no longer a sect but the second party of the state; its policies had to be translated from vision to practicality and inevitably, in the process, they lost that veneer of spiritual idealism which had sustained the pioneers when their goal seemed distant. The religion of socialism was, by the sense of election and comradeship it instilled and the certain victory it promised, a form of

---

1. T.C., 5;8;1921.

belief necessary and comforting to the embattled minority. In Birmingham, socialists remained such a minority even as their counterparts in Sheffield were taking power, and this was one reason for the ethicality of Birmingham's socialism as compared to that of Sheffield. Conversely, as Labour came nearer to national power, the electoral battle assumed greater importance and activists were more loath to preach to the converted when there were votes to be won amongst the electorate at large. The Sparkhill Labour Church finally and reluctantly closed its doors in February, 1929 because of the proximity of the impending General Election, after having been let down by a run of six speakers in succession.[1] Labour thoughts had moved from pious hope to reasoned expectation, from the New Life to the second Labour Government, and the Labour Churches seemed increasingly anachronistic.

The Labour Churches were not, however, the only expression of older-style socialism; others, principally catering for the young, remained and, though they never made a large-scale impact even within the Labour movement itself, they are not without interest. There were, for example, Socialist Sunday Schools in both Birmingham and Sheffield. In Birmingham, the King's Norton branch of the ILP ran a school in the early part of the 1920s; in Sheffield, the ILP ran two Schools (in Heeley and Darnall) and the Attercliffe Labour Party another - these seem to have been in existence for most of the decade.[2]

There are, unfortunately, few details of their local activities and we can only assume that the Schools in Birmingham and Sheffield corresponded to the national practice in teaching a rather didactic and moralistic version of the creed expressed in the Labour Churches.[3] (A Communist

---

1. T.C., 1;2;1929.
2. T.C., 19;1;1923; S.F., June, 1924; April, 1926; SFTLC minutes, EC 12;4;1927.
3. F. Reid, 'Socialist Sunday Schools in Britain, 1892-1939', International Review of Social History, XI, (1966).

Sunday School meeting in Sheffield presumably took a somewhat more 'class conscious' line.[1]) The Schools do, however, seem to have prided themselves on practising an internal democracy which would fit their members for service in the Labour movement and in the socialist society of the future. At King's Norton, with minimal assistance from an adult organiser, all the work was done by the children themselves, and the Heeley School wanted one of its members to be allowed to address Sheffield's May Day rally. In an overall context, though, the lack of references to their work suggest that the Socialist Sunday Schools were fairly small and isolated groupings which played but a small role in the wider Labour movement.

Another group engaged in comparable activity were the Woodcraft Folk, the Sheffield branch of which was founded in April, 1929 and the Birmingham branch five months later.[3] Established in opposition to the popular Boy Scout movement, which they conceived to be militaristic and reactionary, the Folk sought to win over young people to the cause of socialism. The practical appeal of healthy outdoor activity was blended with a curiously nostalgic 'back to the land' philosophy which fused elements of athleticism, bohemianism and ethical socialism. Basil Rawson, then 'headman' of the Sheffield Woodcraft Folk and secretary of the local ILP, expressed the ethos and activity of the Folk at their most ambitious:[4]

> Our Charter is the Socialist Charter. We regard modern civilisation as decadent with little exception. We believe we must strive to develop our personalities and abilities to express ourselves and our ideals, that we must build a sure brain as the foundation of a virile body...
> We hike and camp, study woodcraft, starlore, flowerlore, birdlore, weatherlore, map reading and regional surveying; go in for supple limb tests and games, keen eye training; sunbathing, all kinds of tribal and handcrafts, folk dancing and tribal dances; we study world history, evolution, biology and sex, local history (land

---

1. SCP minutes, 19;9;1921.
2. T.C., 19;12;1919; SFTLC minutes, EC 12;4;1927.
3. Prynn, op. cit., p. 287; T.C., 23;8;1929.
4. Park and Heeley Gazette, July, 1930.

> enclosures), machinery, etc.; we practise arts of many kinds - WITH PURPOSE IN EVERYTHING...
> An Al Commonwealth will need an Al democracy to build it. In the Folk we are creating the NEW DEMOCRACY.

At bottom, the Woodcraft Folk were an expression of the ethical socialist premise that in order to make socialism it was necessary to make socialists. But here the making of socialists had not been debased to mean only the recruitment of Labour voters; it remained a practised belief that socialism had to be lived here and now before it became feasible in the days to come. Will Rowe, the pacifist socialist who founded the Birmingham Woodcraft Folk - established, incidentally, under the auspices of the No More War movement rather than the Labour movement itself - expressed this in a nutshell:[1]

> The aim of the Movement [i.e. the Woodcraft Folk]...should be to teach boys and girls to live noble lives, practise Socialism, and encourage outdoor life...
> "To practise Socialism" is a very different matter from mere lip-service; it is essential to put into practice even small forms of Socialism before one can put Socialism into being nationally.

These were high-flown aspirations which were only partly fulfilled. The Woodcraft Folk remained a small organisation and attracted only patchy Labour support. The Movement as a whole probably regarded their activities as well-meaning but rather eccentric and Labour's more puritanical members must have found some of the Folk's more avant-garde teachings a little disquieting. In general, the Folk were deemed worthy of moral support but essentially irrelevant to a Movement which now placed its main hopes for advancement in the ballot box. The Folk were not part of the Labour mainstream and the existence of the local groups depended on the enthusiasm and dedication of small numbers of individuals who retained an old-fashioned belief in conversion and liked healthy open-air recreation. Will Rowe was one such, Basil Rawson another; in 1934, Rawson became national president of the Woodcraft Folk, a position which he occupied until his death 42 years later.[2]

---

1. T.C., 7;9;1928.
2. J. Springhall, Youth, Empire and Society. British Youth Movements, 1883-1940 (1977), p. 155.

Finally, one other, contrasting, aspect of Labour's approach to the young should be examined - its charitable work among the children of the poor. In the Socialist Sunday Schools and the Woodcraft Folk, Labour was dealing with its own supporters and its own social stratum, the respectable working class. Here, in its activities among the slum dwellers and their offspring, it was venturing into less certain territory. It went in with a mixture of motives, ranging from the philanthropic to the instrumental, the nuances of which are best examined in their actual practice.

At the more high-minded end of the spectrum stood Birmingham's Clarion Cinderella Club, the only remaining club of a series established by Robert Blatchford in the 1890s with the purpose of providing slum children with meals and entertainments. The Birmingham Club now concentrated on running an annual camp in the nearby countryside where groups of twenty or so children from the poorest parts of Birmingham could spend a fortnight's holiday over a six week period in the summer.[1] In 1926, it had looked after 16 miners' children for ten weeks.[2] Though the Club had no organisational connection with the official Labour movement, it was still run, in its own words, by 'working-class socialists' and it maintained its links with Labour by giving an annual account of its year's work in the Town Crier whilst, at the same time, appealing for donations from local working-class bodies.[3] Its annual reports do, indeed, document a considerable number of small donations from Labour Party and ILP branches, trades unions and Cooperative Guilds but the bulk of its finances came now from wealthy middle-class patrons and private companies. And, though the reports include many heart-rending descriptions of the poverty and squalor that the Club came across in the course of its work, they contain no word of socialist critique as to their causes. The Club, though working-class in personnel,

---

1. Birmingham Clarion Cinderella Club, Annual Reports, 1918-1927, BCL.
2. BTC minutes, 24;9;1926.
3. T.C., 30;6;1922; 13;7;1923; 11;4;1924; 5;2;1926.

was not significantly different from any middle-class charity in the actual nature of its work and propaganda. Its relationship with the Birmingham Borough Labour Party ended rather sadly in 1925 when the latter refused a donation due to the unsatisfactory arrangements made for the children's summer camp and the Club itself appears to have folded in 1927 after which date there is no further record of its activities.[1]

Other working-class organisations, including a large number of local Labour Parties, maintained a more direct tradition of socialist charity. The work of Percy Shurmer in organising an annual children's party has alrea been noted and it must have been he who was the driving force behind the St. Martin's and Deritend Ward Labour Party's rather tweely named 'Sunshine Kiddies Fund', established in 1926 to give treats and outings to the local youngsters.[2] The Fund was serious in its work; the 66 children taken to Stourbridge for the day in June, 1926 had been nominated by local schools and were mainly, it was said, the offspring of unemployed ex-servicemen.[3] In the following year, its activities included treating 140 children to a breakfast and a variety concert and taking a further 80 on an outing to Dudley Castle.[4] The Edgbaston Divisional Labour Party undertook similar work when, in 1927, it established the 'Harmonic Society' with the object, among other things, of providing 'treats and a summer outing to the poor children of the district'.[5] One year later, the Society estimated that it had fed and entertained over 1000 children.[6]

These were unusually organised ventures but the references here to teas and parties and entertainments and outings for local youngsters could be multiplied many times over if we include the one-off and ad hoc efforts of the branch parties. Almost invariably these were managed by the women

---

1. BBLP minutes, 7;7;1925.
2. See above, p. 121; T.C., 23;4;1926.
3. T.C., 4;6;1926.
4. T.C., 7;1;1927; 30;9;1927.
5. T.C, 14;1;1927.
6. T.C., 27;1;1928.

members of the Party and frequently by the Women's Sections themselves. They were at their most common around Christmastime when both the plight of the poor and the pangs of conscience were experienced most sharply. Taking January and February, 1926 as a representative sample, we find that the pages of the Town Crier record parties organised by the East Birmingham ILP, St. Mary's Ward Labour Party, Edgbaston Labour Party Northern Section, Sparkbrook Ward Labour Party, the Ladywood Labour Party Tennant Street and Johnstone Street Women's Sections, the West Birmingham Labour Party Winson Green and Albion Street Women's Sections, and the Small Heath Labour Party Women's Section which in all catered for something over 1000 children.[1] Others perhaps went unrecorded but, even as it stands, this represents a massive effort by Labour's activists. In this area, the documentation for Sheffield is far weaker but there is no doubt, as the isolated references to activities in the northern city indicate, that Labour members in Sheffield were doing similar work.[2]

Essentially, this was charity and it did not become socialism because it was carried out by members of the Labour Party. It was a case of the better-off and more 'respectable' members of the working class helping their poorer fellows but it could not, except in the loosest sense, be described as working-class self-help. As Raphael Samuel has suggested, the aristocrati ideal of noblesse oblige found its counterpart in the socialist movement in such activity as it did more widely in the welfare reformism that formed a large part of the Labour Party's electoral appeal to the poorer working classes.[3]

There were, too, other considerations of a more directly political nature. Edgbaston Labour Party was honest enough to describe the work of the Harmonic Society with the local children as 'part of the propaganda',

---

1. T.C., 8;1;1926; 15;1;1926; 29;1;1926; 5;2;1926; 12;2;1926.
2. S.F., September, 1922, September, 1926; S.C., February, 1931.
3. R. Samuel, 'The Middle Class Between the Wars', New Socialist, (March-April, 1983), p. 32.

and at most of these gatherings a local councillor or sometimes Labour's parliamentary candidate would make a short speech drawing an appropriate moral from the event for the children present.[1] The Labour Party was being introduced to the children in the guise of a kindly uncle and it hoped, no doubt, that they would be suitably grateful. The treats were equally designed to give a good impression of the Party to the children's parents who, of course, were also voters. They were certainly seen in this light by the secretary of the Washwood Heath Ward Unionist Association who wrote to Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland for a donation to help the local branch fund its first children's Christmas party as a counter to Labour's efforts in the same field which had been going on for several years:[2]

> I also feel confident that this will be a means of getting at the parents through the children...
> There are cases where the child will insist on its parents recording their vote so as to make sure of receiving an invitation to the Annual Party.

Such adult testimony must, though, be treated with caution. Alfred Green, whose mother and father were keen Labour activists, recalled his yearly visit to the children's party organised by the local Conservative Working Men's Club in Attercliffe:[3]

> As a young "Labourite" keenly antagonistic to all Tory enterprise, I was remarkably open-minded on these occasions. Loot, of any kind, I regarded as being above party politics or anything else; it was there to be obtained and enjoyed!

Children could be 'bought' temporarily but they were hardly trustworthy 'converts' and their parents too probably leavened their gratitude at the efforts of the Party activists with a little cynicism at to their motives. The parties, though, were a means of establishing a local presence which, on the whole, would be regarded sympathetically by a range of people not always amenable to political propaganda of a more conventional nature.

---

1. T.C., 14;1;1927.
2. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/208; G. Ogston to Steel-Maitland, 12;12;192
3. A. Green, Growing Up in Attercliffe (Sheffield, 1981), p. 49.

The treats and outings covered a gamut of possibilities - from the philanthropic to the political, from the patronising to the genuinely compassionate - and without regard to the specific circumstances of each it is not possible to assess their meaning and import. They do, however, go some way to correcting the impression that Labour 'has always had an essentially passive relationship to the working class'.[1] Here was a case of Labour going out to the working class, ministering to its needs, actively seeking its support.

---

1. cf. T. Forester, The Labour Party and the Working Class (1976), p. 124.

8.3 The Arts and Education

Labour's philosophical humanism and the self-improving motivations of its more earnest members found their practical reflection in its approach to the arts and education. Whether the Labour Party really was 'culturally.. the least ambitious organisation ever produced by the British Left' is open to doubt but if we are to take this to mean that it rarely endowed its cultural activities with any political purpose, still less with any revolutionary intention, we may concur.[1] Labour's attitude to the arts and education was rarely in any but the mildest sense 'class conscious'; it regarded the cultural arena as value-free and high art as part of the working class's cultural inheritance, something to be aspired to and enjoyed rather than overturned. There were exceptions to this general policy, as we shall see, but they made little impact on the overall nature of Labour's artistic and educational activities.

The most pervasive of these activities, if only because they required the least equipment and effort, were musical. We have noted already the importance of Labour hymns and music to the Labour Churches and it was a general feature of many Labour Party gatherings of the time that the more serious items would be interspersed by selections of music and song involving either the participation of the audience or a performance by a group of Labour supporters. An advertisement for a meeting to be addressed by George Lansbury in Birmingham Town Hall in 1920 was concluded with the injunction,'Socialist Hymns from 2.30 to 3, accompanied by organ. Socialists bring your hymn-books!' and the big Sunday night meetings of the Sheffield

1. R. Samuel, 'The Workers' Theatre Movement', History Workshop Journal, 4, (Autumn, 1977), p. 103.

ILP were enlivened by contributions from the choir of the Heeley Socialist Sunday School.[1] The Yardley ILP Guild of Youth made a feature of its regular 'Community Singing Nights' and the Witton ILP organised a musical evening each month.[2]

At one level, these events were simply a case of the working class making its own entertainment and it would be mistaken to attach too much ideological significance to them. On the other hand, at a time when working-class entertainment was increasingly being provided by commercial entrepreneurs (in the music hall and cinema) or by the State (on the wireless it is noteworthy that the local Labour Parties were trying to establish forums untainted by outside influence and possible class bias. The political impact of these self-consciously self-sufficient amusements was mitigated, however, by the fact that they catered principally for those already holding Labour allegiances and were rarely able to penetrate a wider working-class culture.

A further illustration of the role played by music in Labour's group life is provided by the large number of choirs and musical sections which were organised by the local parties. In Sheffield, the Ecclesall Divisional Labour Party possessed its own orchestra and Attercliffe ran a children's choir and orchestra.[3] Both Clarion and the ILP formed their own choirs.[4] In Birmingham, the East Birmingham Labour Choir, the Balsall Heath Labour Choir, the Selly Oak Labour Musical Society and the King's Norton Labour Choral Society catered for Party members of musical inclination.[5] The King's Norton Society was particularly active, claiming in 1928 some 45 members who rehearsed weekly and gave on average around 20 performances each year.[6] These efforts, in which Labour was catering primarily to the

---

1. T.C., 13;2;1920; Labour Leader, 31;7;1919.
2. T.C., 11;11;1927; 9;12;1927.
3. S.F., June. 1922; S.D.I., 23;10;1928.
4. S.D.I., 23;4;1923; New Leader, 1;10;1926.
5. T.C., 23;5;1924; 31;8;1923; 26;5;1922; 6;4;1928.
6. King's Norton Labour News, April, 1928.

interests of its members and the demands of its social network proved quite successful. Other, more ambitious, attempts to promote a musical side to the Party's work were less so.

The first endeavour to form a Labour Band in Birmingham began with a letter to the Town Crier in June, 1920.[1] Two months later, the Borough Labour Party endorsed the proposal and made the first of several donations to set the venture on its feet.[2] But the £50 that the central Labour Party and individuals within it spent on the Band did not prove a good investment.[3] Though it was initially restricted to Labour supporters, during the Band's brief six-month working existence it was composed principally of non-Labour personnel and when it eventually folded it boasted just seven members and eleven instruments.[4]

A more successful effort got off the ground in March, 1925 under the auspices of the Birmingham Labour Musical Society. By July, it was reported that 70 members had enrolled and eighteen months later the Society gave its first major concert - a performance of Mendelssohn's 'Hymn of Praise' with choral accompaniment.[5] The Society, which had begun as an individual initiative, came under official Labour auspices when it was re-formed as the Birmingham Labour Musical and Dramatic Union in October, 1927 with the intention of enlisting the local Labour Party musical sections and giving one or two concerts with massed choirs during the course of the year.[6] But such hopes went largely unfulfilled due to the 'apathy in the Divisions' and by 1929 only two choirs were affiliated.[7] The Union maintained an active presence in the local Movement by giving performances at the Labour Churches, the May Day demonstration and a Borough Labour Party Fete but it

---

1. T.C., 18;6;1920.
2. BBLP minutes, 9;9;1920.
3. ibid., 6;3;1922.
4. ibid; T.C., 24;8;1923.
5. T.C., 3;7;1925; 4;2;1927.
6. T.C., 28;10;1927.
7. BBLP minutes, 24;11;1930; BTC Annual Report, 1928-29, p. 38.

rested too heavily on the commitment of too few individuals. By November, 1930, their enthusiasm was wearing thin and it was decided to open participation to all regardless of their politics.[1] Despite the laudable intentions and high hopes of a few activists and the official support of the Borough Labour Party, the Birmingham movement had been unable to sustain its commitment to musical expression.

The reality belied, therefore, the more pious utterances of Labour's musical impresarios who believed in some cases that the musical sections represented not merely a form of improving entertainment but an embryonic socialism. H.G. Sear, the leading light of the Musical and Dramatic Union, expressed this view in a revealing statement of the more ultramundane form of ethical socialism:[2]

> The Millenium is distant, but what is that to a true Socialist. Labour organisations can never be without active organisation... A choir or band, because of the interdependence of individuals all working according to the best plans known, is a Socialist State in little.

Sear was unusually forthright but there was a widespread belief that the united and cooperative effort involved in musical performance inculcated a 'deeper comradeship and...unity of purpose' in those who took part.[3] Perhaps this was true, at least in a modest sense, but though music was part of the fabric of Labour Party life, it functioned primarily as a diversion and an educative entertainment. The more ambitious of the hopes placed in it were not realisable within the modest confines of Labour's cultural horizons.

Labour's approach to the dramatic arts was not essentially different though the form of the medium did encourage the expression of more overtly political statements. Here, too, a number of working-class organisations

---

1. BBLP minutes, 24;11;1930.
2. T.C., 11;2;1927.
3. BTC Annual Report, 1925-26, p. 25.

in both Birmingham and Sheffield ran their own sections. In Birmingham, the Northfield Ward Labour Party and the Erdington and Sparkbrook branches of the ILP each ran drama groups; in Sheffield, Clarion, the ILP and Woodseats Ward Labour Party all produced their own plays and readings.[1]

The productions which the groups mounted varied considerably in content but they all tended, through force of circumstance, to have simple formats and small casts. The Erdington ILP Dramatic Circle specialised in one-act comedies and farces but occasionally it staged more serious drama as when it gave a performance of Miles Malleson's anti-war play, 'Black 'Ell' to a meeting of the Erdington Labour Church.[2] More commonly, it was the drama of such playwrights as George Bernard Shaw, Upton Sinclair and the Capek brothers which was staged by the working-class drama groups - theirs were writings which combined a strong story line with a clear political message and, as such, they made the ideal propaganda material for socialist actors.

By far the most 'ideological' of any of these groups was the People's Theatre Movement founded in Birmingham in 1924 by the Reverend John Lewis (then the socialist minister of the Broad Street Presbyterian Church, later the national organiser of the Left Book Club):[3]

> In its claim to be essentially proletarian in outlook and personnel, the Movement breaks away from all other amateur dramatic societies and establishes itself as a definite working-class organisation... Proletarian players with a proletarian outlook are an encouraging beginning but if the People's Theatre Movement is to be that virile growth that will keep evergreen the artistic side of Socialism, then something more is needed. The Movement must produce its own plays.

This last injunction was not fulfilled but the People's Theatre continued to perform useful, if less venturesome, work within the local Labour movement

---

1. For Birmingham, see: T.C., 2;4;1926; 13;3;1925;
   for Sheffield, see: New Leader, 15;1;1926; Sheffield ILP minutes, 20;4;1922; Park and Heeley Gazette, October, 1930.
2. T.C., 8;1;1926; 9;4;1926; 2;4;1926.
3. T.C., 27;7;1925.

and in 1930 it linked up officially with the Borough Labour Party. By now it had dropped its more radical aims and rhetoric and described its role as being 'to give plays of an Educational, Social and thought-provoking nature' to Labour Party gatherings.[1] Within these more limited terms of reference, the People's Theatre performed valued service in the working-class movement and, though we may regret the fact that culture had once more become something to be brought to the masses rather than created by them, its new role was clearly more in line with Labour's philosophy and creative ambitions.

At the other end of the spectrum stood the Workers' Theatre Group of the Sheffield Educational Settlement. The Group was fortunate in possessing its own premises and the backing of Arnold Freeman, whose devotion and commitment kept the Settlement alive. Freeman's concern was with high culture and among the plays produced by the Workers' Theatre Group in 1923 were those by Masefield, Wilde and Yeats.[2]

Similarly well-intentioned but with less discernible impact was the Workers' Poetry and Art Union which met briefly in Birmingham from 1921. At its monthly meetings, readings were given (of, for example, 'Twelfth Night', G.B. Shaw and Rupert Brooke) which the membership were encouraged to discuss and criticise.[3] One meeting was given up to readings by the members themselves including some of their own work but as, at its peak, the Union had just 25 members and appears to have closed completely in 1922, it can hardly be said to represent any cultural renaissance among the Birmingham working class.[4]

Labour's excursions into the dramatic and literary field reflected the nature of the Party's ethos and ideology. Plays and readings were

---

1. BTC Annual Report, 1931-31, p. 64.
2. Alexander Papers, AVAR 10/2; The Wheatsheaf (Brightside and Carbrook Cooperative Society edition), February, 1923.
3. T.C., 20;5;1921; 12;8;1921; 23;9;1921.
4. T.C., 15;7;1921;23;9;1921.

intended, for the most part, to educate the working class rather than rouse it. There was a vague feeling that the Labour Party in particular and the working class more widely had neglected the cultural arena and ought to take a greater interest in their cultural inheritance. Socialism would need an active and educated citizenry and working people had to be fitted now for the increased responsibilities and opportunities that would fall to them in the future; potential, latent under capitalism, had to be made real. But, in practice, Labour's efforts were slight in impact and limited in scope. Only a small minority of Labour supporters were involved in, or even affected by, the more self-consciously artistic of the Party's activities and these were people likely, by inclination and attitude, to have become active in some similar way in any case. Their socialism gave their art an edge and a greater purpose but was not its progenitor; Labour served primarily as a social context for the artistic sensibilities of its members rather than as a political vehicle though, by its nature, it could not help but be the latter too.

The conflict in the working-class movement between ethical socialist and Marxist analyses found its classic expression in the debate over the different forms of working-class education. In their different ways, both Labour and the revolutionary parties stressed the role of education in preparing the way for social change but, whereas Labour principally saw socialism as the fulfilment of past cultural trends and honoured the arts as an inheritance that the working class should assimilate, the Marxist-influenced Left believed change would only come through the rejection of past, class-based, cultures and the assertion of uniquely working-class values and interests. Whereas to Labour, education was, almost by definition an uncomplicated good because it increased awareness and widened horizons, to the revolutionary Left, education was beneficial only so long as it was

'class conscious'; education which obscured class divisions and taught conventional ('bourgeois') wisdoms they deemed reactionary, part of the capitalist 'dope' which prevented the working class fulfilling its revolutionary potential.

The standard Labour view was epitomised in an article by 'Christopher Lackpenny' in the Town Crier in 1921:[1]

> Labour does not need to tell half-truths in order to make out its case. To assume that Labour, too, needs its own system of "partisan education" biassed to suit its own purpose, is an insult to the cause of Labour and the truths on which it rests. "Partisan education" is not education at all. It is mere propaganda.

But while Labour tended to believe that education by itself would bring socialism, the extreme Left stressed the agency of class. Fred Silvester, then a member of the Birmingham branch of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), argued that 'education was not the weapon but a means of sharpening the weapon' - the weapon, of course, being a working class which understood capitalism and its own historic task in overthrowing the system.[2]

In practical terms, it was the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the Labour Colleges which embodied these two approaches and it was the question of Labour affiliation to one or the other which sparked off the fiercest discussions on working-class education. A debate in the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council as to whether the Council should subscribe to the WEA illustrates the arguments at their most polarised and even caricatured:[3]

> The workers, [Joseph Madin, organiser of the Sheffield Labour College] contended, had no time to bother about general culture. What little mental energy they had to spare after their work should be devoted to the class struggle.
> He therefore preferred the teaching of the Labour Colleges to that of the WEA, the latter being a "boss-class supported organisation". Life was too short for the worker to be writing sonnets on dandelions when the wolf of hunger was snarling at the door...
> Mr. J. Hedley (Communist) said he preferred the Labour Colleges because they had rigid views and took a definite side, but Mr. R.H. Minshall, the president of the Sheffield branch of the WEA, said he

---

1. T.C., 4;2;1921.
2. T.C., 30;4;1920.
3. S.D.I., 27;2;1924.

> hoped the Labour Party would never make economics the only thing in life. Man did not live by bread alone, and he believed that music, art, and poetry were for the workers.
> Labour would not have attained its ideal if economics were to be the only goal and Karl Marx its only prophet.

The fact that it was agreed to affiliate by 57 votes to 37 gives some impression of prevailing opinions in the Labour movement at the time.[1] An examination of the organisational strength of the different currents in working-class education will give further evidence.

The Birmingham Labour College originated in a Social Science Class established by William Paul and Fred Silvester of the SLP in 1913.[2] After the formation of the National Council of Labour Colleges in October, 1921, the Class was re-formed as the Labour College and Fred Silvester (now of the Communist Party) became its first chairman.[3] In its first year, it operated one course (on 'Marxian Economics') but progress was slow. Silvester complained of the inadequate support received from the official Labour movement and the Communist Party but had to admit that he himself had been so busy with Communist Party work that he had been unable to chair a single meeting of the College.[4] By 1923, the only independent working-class education being offered in Birmingham was conducted under the auspices of the Amalgamated Union of Building Trades Workers which had been the first union to affiliate nationally to the National Council of Labour Colleges - in 1922.[5]

In 1925, the Labour College was revived and J.S. Barr (also Labour's parliamentary candidate in Tynemouth) took over as full-time Midlands organiser.[6] It expanded rapidly and by 1926 was running six courses (two on working-class history, two on economic history, one on Marxism and one

---

1. SFTLC minutes, 26;2;1924.
2. Plebs, May, 1923.
3. T.C., 2;12;1921.
4. T.C., 10;2;1922; Plebs, May, 1923.
5. T.C., 16;2;1923; 19;10;1923.
6. T.C, 2;10;1925.

on public speaking) in six different venues in Birmingham.[1] One year later, Barr claimed that the College had organised 24 classes attended by some 509 students - a figure including a number of courses run specifically for such local groups as the Young Socialist League and the ILP Guild of Youth.[2] Thereafter, the lack of information would seem to indicate some decline, compounded in due course by Barr's defection to the New Party.

The Birmingham WEA had a somewhat steadier and sturdier existence. In 1919, it ran nine courses with a total attendance of 131 students.[3] During the early 1920s, the number of courses varied between six and eight but in 1927 there was a major expansion when 19 courses were offered in six different venues.[4] In terms of its membership and affiliated societies, however, the local WEA seems to have peaked in the first part of the decade. In 1921, there were some 480 WEA subscribers and 37 affiliates in Birmingham; by 1927, their numbers had dropped to 391 and 31 respectively.[5]

As to the character of the courses on offer, these rarely had anything of the 'practical' bent of those of the Labour College and were certainly not designed to furnish directly any clear political conclusions. Of the 19 courses run in 1927, two at most - those on Citizenship and Public Speaking - had a practical application, and two others - Economics and Economic History - might have given rise to political speculation. The large majority, ranging from Psychology to Musical Appreciation and from Literature to Folk Dancing, were humanistic and safely non-controversial.[6] The ethos of the WEA was improving, moral and progressivist and, insofar as it possessed an understood political philosophy, it could probably be best described as right-wing Labour. The King's Norton branch was perhaps

---

1. T.C., 15;1;1926.
2. B.P., 5;9;1927; T.C., 14;5;1926; 10;12;1926.
3. Birmingham WEA minutes, 17;12;1919.
4. T.C., 30;9;1921; 22;9;1922; 3;10;1924; 23;10;1925; 23;9;1927.
5. Birmingham WEA minutes, 8;10;1921; 23;5;1927.
6. T.C., 23;9;1927.

not fully typical but it is interesting to note that two of its four tutors were moderate Labour councillors and that Harrison Barrow, George Cadbury Jr. and five other members of the Cadbury family were among its patrons.[1] The WEA was a liberal and avowedly apolitical organisation and it was precisely these attributes of the WEA - in revolutionary eyes, its worst failings - that made most working people in Birmingham, even in the organised working class, prefer its teachings to the sterner and more politicised doctrines of the Labour College. The Labour College, though a powerful influence in its own sphere, was a minority taste - just as revolutionary politics were.

It is also important to point out that, while the WEA and Labour College were battling it out for the loyalties of organised Labour, by far the most influential educational organisation amongst the Birmingham working class as a whole was the Adult School movement. In 1926, there were 62 Adult Schools meeting in Birmingham with a total attendance of 4475 scholars and an average weekly attendance of 2678.[2] The Adult Schools, which originated in Joseph Sturges' attempts to teach illiterate working people to read the Bible, were a powerful reminder of Birmingham's nonconformist traditions and, though their work was now more broadly educational, they retained a strong religious flavour. It would be mistaken to infer any uniform and directly political influence from their work but, broadly speaking, the Schools sustained an atmosphere of progressive liberalism.[3] This, in the unique context of Birmingham, might lead as readily to Unionist sympathies as to support for any of the more usual radical parties. Though a number of Labour figures had connections with the Schools and four Labour councillors were class leaders, inasmuch as the Adult Schools reinforced Birmingham's specific local traditions and loyalties, they must be accounted on balance a force in favour of the Unionist status quo.

---

1. King's Norton WEA minutes, 15;5;1926.
2. One and All (Organ of the Adult School Movement, Midland Supplement), April, 1926.
3. V.W. Garrett, Man in the Street (1939), pp. 109-10.

Turning now to Sheffield, here the Labour College had its origins in a class founded by Charles Watkins of the NUR Education Committee in 1912. It developed rapidly during Sheffield's wartime radicalisation, when J.T. Murphy and Ted Lismer were among the College's tutors, and by 1920 it was running eleven classes with a complement of 250 students and it claimed the affiliation and financial support of some 75 working-class organisations. At this point, most of its leading figures were members of the SLP and the College admitted quite openly that its purpose was to forward the working-class revolution. In the words of its prospectus:[3]

> The policy of the College is to teach the organised workers those social sciences which disclose the processes by means of which social structures arise and function, providing therefore the knowledge of those ways and means to be adopted by the Labour movement for the accomplishment of its historical task.

This was to say, more bluntly, that the Labour College was Marxist and the courses it taught - on industrial and economic history, economics and revolutionary history - were dominated by the Marxist interpretation. The College did, nevertheless, receive support from all sections of Sheffield's organised working class; among those organisations affiliated in 1920 were the Sheffield and Attercliffe branches of the ILP, the Park Divisional Labour Party, the Sheffield branches of the British Socialist Party and SLP, and the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council.[4]

In the following year, internal differences temporarily weakened the College. The majority of the Sheffield SLP had joined the newly-founded Communist Party but most of the SLP stalwarts who ran the Labour College stayed loyal to the old party. A brief but bitter struggle for control of the College ensued which resulted in a victory for the Communists.[5]

---

1. I.W. Hamilton, 'Education for Revolution: the Plebs League and Labour College Movement, 1909-1921', M.A. thesis, University of Warwick, 1972, Appendix.
2. Plebs, December, 1917; September, 1920.
3. Madin Papers, JM/1; Sheffield Labour College Prospectus, N.D.
4. ibid; Sheffield Labour College Syllabus of Classes, 1920-1921.
5. ibid; J. Royle to J. Madin, 4;2;1921; B. Rollings to J. Madin, 22;5;192 SCP minutes, 16;1;1922.

Afterwards, some kind of modus vivendi was patched up and the SLP and the Communist Party were even able to cooperate in the running of a joint course on 'The History of the Modern Working-Class Movement' later that year.[1]

But, for a number of reasons, the College could never regain the vitality and widespread support which it had enjoyed in the immediate post-war period. The Communist take-over, at a time when the Communist Party was becoming hostile to the work of the Labour College movement, weakened the Sheffield College and lowered its standing in the eyes of the orthodox Labour movement. The demise of the SLP robbed it of one of its most active and committed elements. More generally, the temper of the times was changing. The widespread radicalism which had fuelled the industrial and political militancy of the post-war years declined and the receptivity to revolutionary ideas narrowed. By 1932, the College was organising just two classes in Sheffield attended by only 30 students.[2] The College had flourished briefly at a time when the organised workers of Sheffield were temporarily united in a wide-ranging and radical questioning of the status quo. During the twenties this mood diminished and the political options open to the working class became polarised between the reformist Labour position and the revolutionary strategy of the Communists. Most workers opted for the former and the Labour College was isolated and marginalised as a result.

At the same time, the popularity of the WEA was increasing. In 1925 eight course were advertised; by 1931-32, 24 classes were in existence, attended by a total of 420 students.[3] Like those in Birmingham, these were avowedly non-political and non-partisan though the courses in Sheffield seem generally to have had a more practical orientation. Economics, with eight classes in 1931, was the most popular subject, followed by Literature

1. SCP minutes, 31;8;1921.
2. G.P. Jones, A Report on the Development of Adult Education in Sheffield (Sheffield, 1932), p. 32.
3. S.F., September, 1925; Jones, op. cit., p. 30.

(four classes), Esperanto and Musical Appreciation (two each), Economic History, Drama, Geology, Biology, Political Thought, Current Problems and Psychology. There was also a Wireless Discussion Group. There was clearly enough here to give the politically active worker food for thought, and it was said that 22 of Sheffield's councillors (most, if not all, presumably Labour) were past or present students of the WEA in 1932.[1]

The WEA did not give the specifically working-class education that the Labour Colleges espoused - indeed, an occupational breakdown of the WEA' students in south Yorkshire in 1930 revealed almost one third to be in white-collar employment (though of these the large majority were clerks, shop assistants and teachers) - but it had come to be the WEA rather than the partisan Labour College which received most working-class support in Sheffield.[2] The Labour Colleges were dominated, as often as not, by people hostile to orthodox Labour Party politics who found it difficult to make an appeal to mainstream Labour men and women which did not negate their own revolutionary aspirations. For their part, ordinary Labour activists endorsed an ethical socialist approach to education which combined, to their own satisfaction at least, two contradictory propositions. The first of these was that education - identified unproblematically with the truth - was politically neutral. The second was that any education - by its teaching of the truth - would aid the Labour cause. In this scenario, the doctrines of the Labour Colleges, by their rejection of Labour's ethical world-view and strategic gradualism, became not merely irrelevant but objectionable.

Superficially more in tune with traditional Labour thinking, though possessing its own ideological eccentricities, was the Sheffield Education Settlement of Arnold Freeman. Freeman was a disciple of the Austrian

---

1. Jones. op. cit., pp. 30-31.
2. WEA Yorkshire District (south), Annual Report, 1930, p. 3.

philosopher, Rudolf Steiner, who contended that there was a uniquely spiritual dimension to man's existence lost in the course of history which could be recaptured by the development of the higher faculties. What this meant in terms of the Settlement's actual educational work is best illustrated by examining its weekly programme of activites in 1923. On Monday, there were classes in 'Social Problems' and Handicraft; on Tuesday, a 'Homecraft Club' and classes in rhythmic movement and dancing; Wednesday featured a class on voice training and study circles on 'Spiritual Problems' and Alfred Barton's book, A World History for the Workers ; on Thursday, Freeman lectured on socialism and Steiner's philosophy; and the week was rounded off by a fireside chat on literature.[1] Despite Freeman's attempts to proselytise amongst the organised Labour movement and his own descent into more secular politics when he stood as Labour candidate in Hallam, his rather esoteric and high-minded preoccupations could not but have minority appeal. To a certain section of earnest, thinking working people, the Settlement provided a cultural education and haven and, though it made little impact on the Sheffield Labour movement, the Sheffield Educational Settlement too played its own small role in the Labour subculture of the time.[2]

---

1. Alexander Papers, AVAR 10/2; The Wheatsheaf (Brightside and Carbrook Cooperative Society edition), February, 1923.
2. See the reminiscences of Winifred Albaya in Through the Green Door (Sheffield, 1980), passim.

8.4 Sport and Recreation

The attitude of the Labour movement to sport was ambivalent. To many Labour activists, an interest in sport was diversionary, a distraction from the real business of achieving socialism. But others believed that, rather than ignoring or attempting to weaken the working class's sporting instincts, Labour should actively cater for them - both as a means of preventing capitalist domination of sport and as a method of building up Labour's organisation. Speaking for the latter viewpoint, W.H. Milner argued that:[1]

> the Labour movement should cater for every form of social activity in which the people were interested, particularly their sports and recreation, the government of which had previously been in the control of the capitalistic class. Some of their intellectual friends showed a tendency to sneer at the workers' love of sport but they must not be too superior to share in the common joys of the people.

In Sheffield, the United Socialist Institute Football Club had deliberately chosen to enter the Sheffield City League, 'believing that we should play before large crowds and so popularise Socialism'.[2] They, too, met the resistance of some of their fellow socialists but they asserted the useful role that sport could play:[3]

> Our people have mostly been opposed to the football idea, believing that it side-tracks the workers' minds from the real issue. But... it is quite the opposite. Their lack of interest allows the young men to drift into the capitalist clubs which makes propaganda doubly difficult. Our experience teaches us valuable propaganda can be done through sporting channels.

Others who advocated that Labour should run its own sporting activities argued, more grandiosely, that organised workers' sport would foster international contacts and, in the words of a Sheffield trades and Labour Council resolution, 'do much to promote the peace spirit and in inverse

---

1. T.C., 6;5;1927.
2. Workers' Weekly, 10;3;1923.
3. ibid.

ratio act as a barrier to war'.[1] And there were also, of course, many in the Labour movement who simply enjoyed sport for its own sake and wanted to share their pleasure with their fellow Party members.

All these motivations, singly and in combination, found a place in Labour's attempts to build up its sporting side in the 1920s. In the following section, we examine both these impulses and the activities they gave rise to in Birmingham and Sheffield.

Amongst the most ambitious attempts to promote a specifically Labour sporting apparatus was the Birmingham Labour Football League, founded in 1923 at the instigation of the Rotton Park ILP. At the inauguratory meeting, it was announced that nine Labour Football Clubs were already in existence and it was decided to increase their numbers by circularising trades unions, Cooperative Guilds and other working-class bodies.[2] The League's appeal combined both the more prosaic and most visionary aspects of Labour's sporting ambitions - its avowed purpose being:[3]

> to combine recreation with propaganda in the Labour and Socialist movement. Such a combination is absolutely essential if we are to maintain progress in the movement and keep aglow the spark of keen enthusiasm in that very important person, the Young Socialist. The League is but the embryo of what we hope will eventually grow into the International Socialist Workers' Sports Federation. If we are to affiliate to any body, it will be to Tom Groom's organisation, not to any capitalist organisation.

The circular did not add greatly to the League's membership but, with official Labour support (a delegate from the Borough Labour Party was appointed in September), the League duly got under way and by April, 1924 could look back with some satisfaction on a successful first year.[4] Eleven

---

1. S.D.I., 21;11;1927.
2. T.C., 27;4;1923; 6;7;1923.
3. T.C., 17;8;1923. Tom Groom founded the first Clarion Cycling Club, in Birmingham, in 1894 and later became secretary and president of the National Clarion Cycling Club. In 1923, he was the chief instigator of the British Workers' Sports Federation which was intended to encourage working-class sport under Labour movement auspices in Britain and foster international links with similar bodies on the Continent.
4. BBLP minutes, 13;9;1923.

clubs had joined and it was said, with some possible exaggeration, that between 300 and 400 players had become members of the Birmingham Labour movement through its influence.[1] The League felt confident enough to reject contemptuously the approaches of the Birmingham Football Association for its affiliation. The latter, it stated, was a capitalist organisation which possessed its own share capital and received a portion of its revenues from money made in the professional matches of the F.A. Cup. In reply to a letter from a Mr. Eden, secretary of the Birmingham Football Association, L.A. Byfield wrote:[2]

> we as a Socialist Football League stand in much the same position today as our party did in the year 1893. Our old pioneers were proud of their "glorious isolation" as a working-class movement just as we are of our Socialist Workers' Football League. They have made progress! We, too, shall make progress when the rank and file of our class throw off the shackles of the capitalist and remove the "clinkers" of misunderstanding from their eyes...
> Sooner or later, "capitalised sport" will have to make room for the British Socialist Workers' Sports Federation and when that day dawns Mr. Eden will be seeking another appointment.

However, such optimism was severely misplaced even in the short term. Though the League functioned for one more season with 13 teams, for reasons which are not clear it folded in 1925.[3]

In 1927, a serious attempt was made to revive the League. Delegates from 20 Labour organisations attended the opening meeting at which it was agreed to start anew.[4] Four months later, just three Labour Football Clubs had been formed and, as nothing further is heard of the Birmingham Labour Football League, we may assume that the high hopes which attended its founding came to naught.[5]

It is worthwhile placing this record in perspective by comparing it with the contemporary success enjoyed by the Birmingham and District Works Amateur Football Association which in the 1924-25 season was running twelve

---

1. T.C., 25;4;1925.
2. T.C., 9;5;1925.
3. T.C., 10;1;1925.
4. T.C., 6;5;1927.
5. T.C., 16;9;1927.

divisions, comprising 107 clubs and 154 teams.[1] The Association had been established by the employers in 1905 and proclaimed in its constitution an ideology and objective that might have been expressly written to confirm the worst fears of Labour activists about 'capitalist' sport.[2] It is doubtful, of course, that these considerations had any profound influence on the vast majority of participating sportsmen though the employers' provision of subsidised sport may have predisposed some towards a more accommodating attitude. What is certain is that capitalist football, both in the works' league and at Villa Park and St. Andrews, had a considerably larger public impact than the socialist version. The Birmingham Labour Football League had briefly performed a valuable service for the younger and more energetic members of the local Labour movement but it had not proved successful in breaking out of this milieu. Mr. Eden's job was safe for a few years yet!

The works' football league in Sheffield, conducted under the auspices of the Sheffield and District Works' Sports Association (it ran cricket, golf, swimming and tennis sections as well), was smaller than that of Birmingham but included representative teams from nearly all the major works of the city.[3] It was in opposition to this body that the Trades and Labour Council attempted to set up its own Sports Section in 1927 , the object of

---

1. N. Tiptaft, The History of the Birmingham and District Works Amateur Football Association (1905-1955), (Birmingham, 1955), p. 66.
2. ibid., p. 5. The Association aimed:
   To assist in the social unity between employers and employed, and furthermore to assure employers that the Association will not countenance, nor be contributors to, any player losing time from business to the secondary interest of sport.
   To help by recreation to fit men better for their daily task, and make of them more contented workmen because of their employers' interest in their well-being, and to form character and make of them better and healtheir citizens.
3. Anon., Sheffield and District Works Sports Association. Golden Jubilee 1919-1969 Souvenir Booklet (Sheffield, 1969), no pagination.

which was:[1]

> to supplant the Sports Movement now being fostered by the employers by a Movement controlled by the Workers themselves and thus stimulate the Trade Union Movement.

The initial impulse for the Section came from a resolution from the Sheffiel Central branch of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers urging the establishment of a 'Young Workers' Sports Organisation'.[2] This had led the Trades and Labour Council to organise a conference of trades union and Labou bodies in November, 1927, addressed by Tom Groom, where it was agreed to establish a sports section which would join up with the British Workers' Sports Federation once it was off the ground.[3] The Council gave its imprimatur to the venture in June, 1928 but already misgivings had crept in as a result of the Communist take-over of the British Workers' Sports Federation at its congress in the same year.[4] By November, 1928, the Secti was clearly failing; it had run up debts which it could not pay off and no affiliated organisation was willing to come to its assistance.[5] Eleven months later, it was wound up without compunction.[6]

The Trades and Labour Council's Sports Section was a dismal failure. Its existence, other than at the organisational level, is uncharted and it seems quite possible that the Section did not conduct any actual sport. Given the strength of the Sheffield Labour movement, this failure seems surprising but it was clearly the case that, so far as the majority of trades council delegates were concerned, the Section was an irrelevance which, once additional financial and political problems had arisen, became insupportable.

While Labour officials were politically committed to, and would

---

1. SFTLC minutes, DM 26;6;1926.
2. ibid., 30;8;1927.
3. S.D.I., 21;11;1927.
4. SFTLC minutes, EC 12;6;1928.
5. ibid., DM 27;11;1928.
6. ibid., DM 22;10;1929.

usually have genuinely welcomed, a strong sporting side to Labour's activities as a matter of principle, they lacked in practice either the time or motivation to translate these pieties into concrete action. Reciprocally official initiatives at this level lacked the genuine rank and file input necessary to sustain them. The real impact of Labour's sporting and recreational activities was made, with less fanfare and less trumpeting of ideological motives but with considerably more spontaneous support, at the grass roots level and it is to this area which we turn to now.

In Birmingham, the Saltley Labour Cycling and Athletic Club was founded by the Saltley Ward Labour Party in April, 1923.[1] In the first year of its existence, it concentrated solely on cycling but in 1925 a swimming section was established which rapidly became a popular attraction - by April, it boasted 40 male and 50 female members.[2] The Club was strengthened in July, 1926 by an alliance with the East Birmingham Trades and Labour Club and something of the role it had won for itself in the local community is shown by the swimming gala it organised in 1926 which was attended by over 1600 members of the public.[3] A Walking Section establishe later in the year added another string to its bow and the Club had clearly come to be a valued part of local life in this strongly Labour community.[4]

Cycing was a popular pastime in the Labour movement at this time and, as well as the Saltley club, there were at least eight other Labour-based cycling clubs in Birmingham in the 1920s. Erdington, Aston and Edgbaston Labour Parties and the Young Socialist League had established clubs in 1924 and they were followed in subsequent years by the West Birmingham ILP Guild of Youth, Small Heath and Yardley, and the West Birmingham Labour Party.[5]

---

1. T.C., 9;3;1923.
2. T.C., 17;4;1925.
3. T.C., 16;7;1926; 24;9;1926.
4. T.C., 1;10;1926.
5. T.C., 22;8;1924; 30;5;1924; 12;9;1924; 25;6;1926; 13;5;1927; 22;6;1928.

In 1926, the originator of them all, the Birmingham Clarion Cycling Club, was revived.[1]

For most of these clubs and the majority of their members, the emphasis was on enjoyment. Cycling provided a cheap and easy means for working people to escape briefly the gloom and dirt of the big cities by visiting the surrounding countryside. For the Labour cyclists too, their weekend outings were mainly a source of healthy pleasure but sometimes more ideological motives would be brought into play. The Ruskin Cycling Club of the Aston Labour Party claimed 62 members who, it was said:[2]

> take to cycling simply for pleasure and Labour and Socialist propaganda work. Whilst out riding we chalk the roads with 'Read the 'Town Crier', 'The Herald', etc.", go into public houses and give speeches 'Why I read the 'Town Crier'" and so on.

Once under way, the Clarion Cycling Club, too, undertook to spread Labour's message in the rural areas that surrounded Birmingham.[3] The particular value of cyclists to the local Labour movement - as despatch riders and messengers - was never better illustrated than in the General Strike, and the Ruskin Cycling Club received a formal commendation from the Aston Labour Party in recognition of its services.[4]

In 1925, the Birmingham Labour Motor Cycling Club was established with a rationale and purpose substantially similar to those of its pedal-powered counterparts though it tended to venture further afield on its weekend trips.[5] It developed a small but active membership and was strengthened in July, 1925 by a merger with the Birmingham Clarion Motor Cycle Club.[6]

The landscape of south Yorkshire and Derbyshire was less suited to cycling but was ideal for walking, and in the interwar period rambling was

---

1. T.C., 23;4;1926.
2. T.C., 18;9;1925.
3. T.C., 17;6;1927.
4. T.C., 11;6;1926.
5. T.C., 22;5;1925.
6. T.C., 3;7;1925.

a mass participation sport for the Sheffield working class. The Peak District, in particular, containing some of the most beautiful and unspoilt countryside in England and easily accessible from Sheffield, exercised an almost irresistable attraction on many people disenchanted with the notorious dirt and grime of industrial Sheffield. It was calculated that 30,000 people departed Sheffield Midland Station for the rural stops of the Peak line during an average August.[1] Others walked directly, cycled or travelled by coach. Rambling was, by any standards, a major form of recreation in Sheffield where there were over 30 rambling clubs in existence in the mid-1920s.[2]

A number of these had Labour and Cooperative affiliations and the largest and best known of any of the clubs was the Sheffield Clarion Ramblers which claimed in 1921 a membership of 1530.[3] Of these, it was estimated that only 200 were regular walkers but the importance of the Clarion club spread far beyond the narrow confines that this would suggest through the zeal and determination of its secretary, G.H.B. Ward. Ward had founded the Clarion Ramblers in 1901 and had become, two years later, the first secretary of the Sheffield Labour Representation Committee. Rambling was not a distraction from his socialism but an integral part of it; the simple, healthy pleasures of rambling were both a foretaste of the socialist society to come and a perpetual reminder of the present iniquities of capitalism and private ownership.[4] Virtually all the Peak District was in the hands of private landlords and large parts of it had been declared out of bounds - often purely in order that the upper classes could have the pleasure of shooting grouse. There could scarcely have been a more vivid illustration of the injustices of the capitalist system than this for the working men and women of Sheffield.

---

1. H. Hill, Freedom to Roam (Ashbourne, 1980), pp. 55-56.
2. Sheffield Clarion Ramblers, Handbook, 1926-27, p. 185.
3. S.D.I., 3;1;1921.
4. Hill, op. cit., p. 32.

In order to remedy this state of affairs, Ward equipped himself with a unique and unparalleled knowledge of the ancient rights of way of the Peak which he used to spearhead his campaigns for the revival of former rights of public access. In 1926, Ward was the chief instigator and first chairman of the Sheffield and District Ramblers' Federation (comprising 18 clubs), established to preserve the natural beauty of the countryside and to support free access.[1] Later Ward's efforts, conducted principally through lobbying and peaceful protest, were supplemented by more direct action. The first of the famous Mass Trespasses - which were largely under Communist inspiration - occurred in April, 1932 when 500 people risked arrest and the violence of the gamekeepers when they deliberately intruded onto a closed portion of the High Peak.[2]

Rambling, then, was unusual in being a working-class recreation which, potentially at least, taught clear political lessons. Ward himself saw this, writing in 1926 to his friend, J.S. Middleton (national secretary of the Labour Party), that:[3]

> the youngsters are now leaving the Boy Scouts for the moors of the Peak at the age limit and the girls are going with them. They're sometimes noisy like all postwar youth but the propaganda is really fine for they are converted without preaching and lecturing and the movement reaps the result of it.

It is also interesting to note that the current (1985) secretary of the Sheffield area Communist Party dates his support of the Party back to the days when, as a young man in the early thirties, he was impressed by the extra fire and sharpness shown by the members of the Young Communist League' rambling section.[4] Among the other parts of the working-class movement to run their own rambling clubs were the Sheffield ILP and the ILP Guild of Youth and the Sheffield Cooperative Party.[5] That rambling had a

---

1. Sheffield Clarion Ramblers, Handbook, 1927-28, p. 150.
2. Hill, op. cit., p. 62.
3. National Labour Party archives, J.S.M. Correspondence; G.H.B. Ward to J.S. Middleton, N.D. [March-April, 1926].
4. In conversation.
5. G.H.B. Ward to J.S. Middleton, loc. cit.; S.C., August, 1922.

considerable following is shown by the fact that the main ILP club had over 100 members and the Cooperative Club some 400.[1]

Aside form these sporting and recreational efforts, there were a whole range of Labour-associated social activities - less athletic but serving essentially the same purpose. Contrary to some assessments, the Labour Party in the 1920s did possess an authentic group life, modest in scope but certainly significant within the terms of its own members' work and perceptions.

Dancing was one of the most popular pastimes of the time and a large number of local Labour Parties and ILP branches organised regular, often weekly, dances for members and friends. The Attercliffe Divisional Labour Party, for example, was able, possessing its own premises, to organise two dances and a members' social each week, and at the Heeley Labour Hall there was a weekly programme featuring children's dancing on Mondays, an adults' select dance on Tuesdays, the Junior League's social and dance on Fridays, and a further social and dance for the adults on Saturdays.[2] Among the organisations credited with organising weekly dances in Birmingham were the Rotton Park and Witton branches of the ILP and the Perry Common, Northfield, Yardley, Saltley, Small Heath and King's Norton branches of the Labour Party.[3]

For the less energetic, there was always cards and, alongside the dances, many parties ran frequent cards nights and whist drives. The Attercliffe and Park Divisional Labour Parties ran twice-weekly and weekly whist drives; Ecclesall went even further in organising four cards nights each week.[4] In Birmingham, the Rotton Park ILP and Perry Common Labour

---

1. New Leader, 13;8;1926; S.C., August, 1922.
2. S.F., July, 1922; February, 1925.
3. T.C, 13;4;1926; 24;9;1926; 12;2;1926; 3;8;1928; Labour Torch, April, 1927, February, 1928; King's Norton Labour News, September, 1928.
4. S.F., July, 1924; February, 1925; June,1922.

Party were among the groups with regular cards nights, and the West Birmingham Divisional Labour Party formed its own whist club and even mooted the idea - without, it seems, any real success - of a Labour Whist League.[1]

Such activities hardly presaged the social revolution, of course, but, then, that was not their primary aim. They served two principal purposes in fact; they catered for the social requirements of Party members and their acquaintances, and they were a means of raising finance. The whist drives of the Aston Cooperative Party, for example, brought in a total of £14-12-4½ in 1930, each making a small but useful profit of around 10/-.[2] Given the fact that most Labour Party and ILP branches met for political purposes just once or twice a month, these more regular social occasions must have formed an important, to some perhaps the most important, part of Party life. At the very least, they impressed the belief and formed an actuality in which the Labour Party was far more than a mere electoral machine.

To a lesser extent, they were also a means of presenting a public face of the Labour Party and recruiting new members. The 'Reservoir Labour Representation and Social Club', set up in the Reservoir Tavern by the Rotton Park and Ladywood Labour Parties 'in order to get into closer touch with the people in these wards', was one example of this type of work.[3] It was, however, an unusually outgoing venture for the Labour movement which tended, in its social activities, to look inwards to its own supporters rather than outwards to the wider public.

Cast in the same mould were the many outings which were arranged by the local parties for their members. Taking the case of Birmingham for which we have better records, these ranged from a weekly ramble in some

1. T.C., 13;4;1923; 28;9;1928; 11;7;1924.
2. Aston Cooperative Party Cash Book, 1930-1931.
3. T.C., 27;2;1920.

nearby beauty-spot (the Clent and Lickey Hills, lying immediately to the south-west of the city's borders, were favoured areas) to the annual summer trip by 'chara' to a place of interest within driving distance. There were few, if any, parties which did not arrange at least one outing a year and many, particularly the Women's Sections, arranged more. It is worth giving a description of one such outing - that made by 60 members of the West Birmingham Labour Party to Stratford upon Avon in July, 1922. They were met their arrival by members of the Stratford Labour Party and then given a guided tour of the local sights. Tea followed, when they were addressed by Cllr. Hall (Labour representative for All Saints' Ward) and other worthies of the local movement. After tea, a boat trip on the Avon:[1]

> during which the West Birmingham songsters charmed the natives and sundry other boating parties with their vocal efforts, not forgetting the Red Flag...
> Ten o' clock found us back in "Brum", safe and sound, tired but happy and all concerned voting it one of the jolliest outings they ever had

This was typical. The outings were not political events but often the trippers would call in on the local Labour headquarters of the town they were visiting. More occasionally, there would be some overt propaganda - usually to the members themselves, sometimes to passers-by as when the East Birmingham ILP sought to enlighten the benighted denizens of Kenilworth.[2] Almost invariably, the day would end, after a good walk and some refreshment with the singing of the group's favourite songs and Labour hymns. These outings, which brought together kindred souls in a light-hearted atmosphere gently permeated by politics, were an important component of what the Labour Party was and meant to its rank and file. To the Birmingham City branch of the ILP, they were 'an incentive to work for the cause of socialism'.[3] We may agree, at least, that they were occasions when the much-vaunted comradeship and fellowship of the Labour movement became something real and tangible.

---

1. T.C., 28;7;1922.
2. T.C., 18;7;1924.
3. T.C., 12;5;1922.

Taking the process one stage further were those groups of comrades who aranged annual holidays together. The Aston branch of the Young Socilialist League took a week's holiday in the Welsh mountains, booking a field from a local farmer and setting up their own camp complete with Red Flag. Around 16 went, some cycling all the way, others travelling with the lorry carrying their equipment. Lily Moody reckons that it cost them £1 each all-in.[1] More ambitious were the Sheffield Cooperative Party Ramblers who in 1922 and 1926 booked bungalows at Claughton in the Forest of Bowland; in 1926, around 60 members holidayed together in this way.[2]

To complete this look at the recreational and social side of the Labour movement's work, we will concentrate on three sections to whom such activities were of especial significance - women, the young and Clarion.

Writing in 1929, Egon Wertheimer noted the 'impulse to a far more active social life' in the Labour Party given by the many and varied activities of the Women's Sections, and it is certainly true that no other part of the Movement placed as much emphasis on keeping its members entertained as well as politically active.[3] The Women's Sections usually met during the afternoons and catered principally for women not in employment, either housewives or young mothers. As a result, for many of the women members, who unlike their male relatives had no established role outside the home, the sections were not merely an expression of their political beliefs but an important social outlet and it was important that a bright and interesting calendar of activities was arranged to attract and retain those to whom politics was not a natural or easily acquired interest

This was recognised by the Sheffield Women's Labour Association who

---

1. Interview with Lily Moody.
2. Sheffield Cooperative Party Rambling Club minutes, 11;6;1922; 7;2;1926
3. Wertheimer, op. cit., p. 119.

reported in 1924 that:[1]

> New supporters of the Women's Movement [i.e. the Women's Sections] have been enticed by means of the prospect of delightful social hours spent in the company of happy, homely women.

In Birmingham, the Lozells Ward Labour Party Women's Section interspersed lectures by, among others, John Strachey and O.G. Willey with musical recitals and songs and it promised that at all its meetings everyone would get a cup of tea.[2] The Yardley Women's Section, on the other hand, enlivened its normal political business with a series of visits to an orphanage and several Corporation departments.[3] While to some, such activities may have appeared a dilution of the real business of politics, in reality the Women's Sections were performing a valuable political service in making the Labour Party more accessible and interesting to those to whom politics was not a way of life or sole concern. They also encouraged a genuine friendliness and camaraderie which added much to the Sections' successful functioning. Will Chamberlain was among the many who acknowledge that 'women are showing us the value of social functions'.[4]

The Women's Sections also had a specific, not to say unavoidable, interest in children - both their own and other people's. To cater for the members' own children, rambles, outings and picnics were arranged during the summer months and the Attercliffe Women's Section used to hold some of its regular weekly meetings in a local park; the children were brought alo and played while their mothers attended to the day's political business and afterwards everyone shared a picnic tea.[5] Such activities merged easily with the women's larger involvement in the Party-organised children's treat and outings discussed earlier.

Nor was the women's contribution to the social side of the Labour

---

1. S.F., August, 1924.
2. T.C., 1;11;1929.
3. T.C., 16;7;1926.
4. T.C., 17;8;1923.
5. A. Green, op. cit., p. 60.

movement confined to their own activities. The Labour Party's commitment to sexual equality was quickly forgotten whenever the Party had a social or a dance when, in almost every case, it was the women who were expected to do the catering. In the same way, should the Party stage some fund-raising event, it was usually the female members who did the bulk of the work. Women did also, of course, take an active part in the organisational and propagandist work of the Labour movement but, in general, most of the more party political type of activity was undertaken by the men. The overall balance of female participation in the Party is probably exemplified well by the women of the Woodseats Ward Labour Party in Sheffield who, it was stated, were:[1]

> amongst our most active workers in the ward party...Not only have they contributed by their gifts of refreshments and assistance on the occasion of the social gatherings, and by their invaluable work in connection with the Bazaar, but in the ordinary branch work, collecting members' subs. and seeking new members, they have in several cases outshone the efforts of the male members.

As to the young, they were both the principal targets and the most active participants in the Labour movement's recreational activities. The Labour Party was keen to recruit young members and many of its sporting sidelines were designed to appeal to young people who, it was felt, would be put off by too single-minded a concentration on dry political work. Equally it is true that the Labour football clubs, cycling sections and the suchlike must, by their very nature, have attracted a predominantly young clientèle. An examination of the youth sections confirms the impression that recreational outlets were particularly important for the Party's younger membership.

The Birmingham Young Socialist League is a good place to start for it was set up mainly by the young people themselves and run, in its own words,

---

1. Park and Heeley Gazette, January, 1930.

on 'the fundamental principle that only youth can cater for youth'.[1] In its first year of operations, 1924, the League worked vigorously to ensure that it offered a balanced programme of political, educational and recreational activities; tennis, swimming, rambling and cycling sections were set up and, of its four meetings per month, the first was set aside for an address, the second for a musical programme, the third for a literary evening, and the fourth for a debate.[2]

The Young Socialist League was unusually active but certainly not unique in the range of amusements it offered. The Soho Ward Labour Party League of Youth, for example, organised its own swimming, cycling and fishing sections, the Rotton Park ILP Guild of Youth ran drama, camping, cricket and rambling sections, and the West Birmingham and Yardley ILP Guil of Youth possessed their own cycling clubs.[3] The overall strength of interest in sport among the young socialists was such that a Birmingham and District Socialist Youth Sports Association (comprised of delegates from al parts of Labour's youth movement) was able to arrange annual rallies in the city in 1929, 1930 and 1931.[4]

Before the First World War, it was the Clarion movement, under the inspiration of Robert Blatchford, which had done most to bring enjoyment and pleasure into the Labour movement. The Clarion movement believed that the healthy fellowship envisaged as part of the Cooperative Commonwealth should also be practised in the contemporary socialist movement - both for its own sake and as a prefigurement of what was to come. The cycling and hiking and myriad social activities of Labour activists in the interwar period were foreshadowed in the work of Clarion's supporters before 1914

---

1. T.C., 14;5;1926.
2. T.C., 6;6;1924; 18;7;1924.
3. T.C., 12;7;1929; 18;7;1930; 12;3;1926.
4. T.C., 8;5;1931.

but, ironically, Clarion itself was in serious decline. The strongly pro-war attitudes of its old leadership had lost Clarion considerable respect and affection among the socialist rank and file, and times had changed.

In Sheffield, though, the Clarion movement was able to maintain a healthy existence primarily as a result of the vigour of the outdoors side of the local Labour movement. The Sheffield Clarion Ramblers were, of cour one major source of strength but the Clarion Club House, conveniently situated in the nearby Peak on the city's borders at Dore Moor, was also visited by many other groups of Labour ramblers and trippers. The choral and dramatic sections already referred to also testify to a local presence of some siginificance. Although Clarion locally was not immune from the problems that had afflicted the national body (the United Socialist Institute Football Club had originally been called Clarion F.C. but dropped the name in protest at the leadership's 'jingo attitude' during the War), it remained a viable and valued part of the local Labour movement.[1]

In Birmingham, Clarion fared less well. The Midland Clarion Club - located in a former isolation hospital at Sheldon on the eastern edge of th city - had originally been opened in 1914.[2] Not much could be expected during the War but in 1919 the Club House announced its presence in optimistic terms:[3]

> The Club House is a rendezvous for Socialists of every shade of opinion, and rebels of the deepest dye.
> On the social side there are numerous CONCERTS, several impromptu DEBATES, DANCES, WHIST DRIVES, and most of the best PLAYS produced by the Club House Dramatic Society.

In 1920, the club was running a weekly dance but for the rest of the early twenties it was largely inactive.[4] A meeting in January, 1925 was called t

---

1. Workers' Weekly, 10;3;1923.
2. T.C., 3;10;1930.
3. T.C., 10;10;1919.
4. T.C., 30;4;1920.

revive the Club and in May it was reported that 23 organisations were newly affiliated and that the Saltley and Edgbaston Cycling Clubs had agreed to use the Club House as their headquarters.[1] The energetic group of young socialists now running Clarion locally were also able to re-form its own cycling club in the following year and a swimming club in 1928.[2]

But just two years later, in 1930, the Clarion Club House was closed; unable to attract enough local support, it finally gave up the struggle afte running up a deficit in every year since 1918. A number of factors were hel to account for this, the most important of which appears to have been the general alienation from Clarion among socialists arising from its vehemently pro-war attitudes. Neither was the Club House as well placed as its Sheffie counterpart; it was rather out-of-the-way and could not offer the same scer and recreational compensations as Dore Moor. Finally, it was said, the energies and attitudes of the younger enthusiasts who had revived the Club also had the effect of making the older members feel 'out of place' and their support dropped off as a result.[3]

While all these explanations, no doubt, held some truth, the fundame reason for the closure was that the Clarion movement itself had been superseded. It had been superseded not because the socialist and Labour movement had ceased to concern itself with the recreational interests of it members but, actually, because it catered for them itself in a more organis and comprehensive fashion. Special circumstances prevailed in Sheffield bu generally the self-imposed distance placed by Clarion between itself and th official Labour movement made it, as an independent and largely recreationa organisation, seem increasingly irrelevant and unnecessary to the majority of Labour activists.

---

1. T.C., 9;1;1925; 1;5;1925.
2. T.C., 23;4;1926; 18;5;1928.
3. T.C., 3;10;1930.

8.5 Conclusion

To attempt any overall characterisation of the Labour subculture is a difficult and probably fairly futile task. Labour in the 1920s remained a coalition of different interests and different strands of thought and practice. Nevertheless, there is a real sense in which a genuine coalescence of all these elements was taking place, a process - paralleling that in the ideological domain - in which a Labour identity was being formed and consolidated. As this took place, certain influences were lost or diminished, others assumed a new prominence, and each left its mark on each other and the composite that was being constructed. Here, we are concerned to draw some fairly broad conclusions as to the nature of this composite.

The 'Socialism of the New Life', recreated so sympathetically by Stephen Yeo and Stanley Pierson, was in a terminal decline. Its strengths had been the result of its weakness; now, as Labour grew and prepared to take power, its prescriptions and compensations became irrelevant. It lingered on more forcefully in Birmingham precisely because there, in the heartland of Unionism, Labour activists could still feel themselves pioneers and the psychological mechanisms of inspiration and dedication had a greater necessity and purpose. Where the idea of a genuine and practised conversion to socialism remained stronger was in work among the young. The prospect of capturing young minds to the cause, the hope even of bringing up a socialist generation, were still such as to motivate not a few ethical socialists. But most now placed their hopes and energies behind a political revolution won, by argument and persuasion, through the ballot box rather than a cultural revolution achieved by an ethical conversion.

Nor did Labour as a whole really believe that, in its cultural and recreational activities, it was building up a force capable of subverting the capitalist status quo. There was certainly a widespread feeling that

Labour ought to be developing its non-political presence and this had its origins in several strands of thought. One derived from a view of the socialist future strongly influenced by William Morris; this considered that, if Labour was really to be fit for the Cooperative Commonwealth, it should be preparing its members and supporters now to a proper realisation of humanity's achievements and their own creative potentials. Another, subGramscian view, was that Labour should be increasing the size and scope of its own activity and organisation in order to combat the capitalist domination of all the other major sources of public information and entertainment. Finally, as eyes wandered over the North Sea, there was a certain amount of guilt, a feeling that, as Labour was now the principal social democratic party in Europe, it ought to be trying harder to emulate the Germanic thoroughness of the SPD.

But the true rationale of nearly all of Labour's non-political activities was, so far as their practitioners were concerned, much simpler. The subculture was primarily a case of ordinary people making their own entertainment. Before the cinemas, wireless and television had asserted their dominance as suppliers of mass entertainment, the working class had still, to a considerable extent, to amuse itself. In following this pattern the Labour Party was substantially no different from any other voluntary association of the time in which the members arranged their own leisure activities.

Inasmuch as the Labour Party subculture was differentiated from that of other bodies, it was in degree rather than in kind, by self-assessment and gloss rather than by actual practice. The Labour Party's membership was composed principally of the more earnest and respectable stratum of the working class. It tended also to be predominantly socialist. The coincidence of these two factors led, firstly, to an uncommonly active and self-improving group life, and, secondly, to an unusually ideological

appraisal of its significance. In Labour Party terms, friendliness was transformed into fellowship and camaraderie into comradeship. This was important not insofar as it was true or false (though the idea that in the 'good old days' Labour had none of the internal wrangling that now apparently characterises the Party is quite mythical) but insofar as it became the truth by forming the Party's self-image. The Labour Party did not imagine, except in rare cases, that its extra-political activities presaged the New Life or contributed to the crumbling of bourgeois culture but it could still believe that they offered something larger and more important than mere entertainment.

It undoubtedly was the case that the Party's group life did serve ar extremely valuable function in bringing members together and breaking down the social-political divide. By so doing, the Party became something more than an organisational framework for political activists; Labour came to play a valued role in the social life of its members and consequently clain a greater affection and loyalty than any merely political body could have done. In Birmingham and Sheffield, at least, this observation applies as much to the ward parties of the Labour Party as to the branches of the ILP whose roles, in most respects, appear interchangeable. Nostalgia is alway a dangerous commodity for the historian but the reminiscences of Alfred Gree of his early days in the Attercliffe Labour Party appear justified:[1]

> All these treats and outings and the general sociability were important...and they firmly implanted in my mind the association of working-class politics with fun and enjoyment. Politics was not something apart from life, but was there to be enjoyed as well as understood. This was all very different from the dreary round of mechanical activity which passes for politics today.

Herein lay the true merit of the Labour Party's extra-political work. Labour members were not revolutionary and they had no thoughts of 'hegemon

---

1. A. Green, op. cit., p. 61.

They built up not a counter-culture but a subculture, not a state within a state but a pink-tinged reflection of surrounding society. The Party's social life arose to service the expressed needs and preferences of its members; Labour's cultural ambitions were, in reality, modest. Within these, its own unpretentious terms, the Labour Party developed a successful group life. To judge its work by other standards is neither historically valid nor politically objective.

Chapter 9

THE COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT

9.1 Introduction

The Cooperative movement was the third section - alongside the trades unions and the Labour Party - of the Labour trinity and, in some ways, it was the most important. In the interwar period, it remained an almost entirely, and avowedly, working-class organisation and one which possessed a very considerable presence in ordinary working-class life. 'Coop' stores were a feature of most towns and shopping centres and a large proportion of working people were enrolled as Cooperative members and were thus eligible for the much-prized 'divi' (the dividend allotted to purchasers according to the financial value of their custom). But the Cooperative movement went beyond narrowly trading concerns in providing a comprehensive social and cultural life for its supporters through its members' guilds, educational classes and its many and varied artistic and recreational activities.

In 1917, the Cooperative movement went even further when it voted decisively to enter the political arena by agreeing to stand its own candidates in local and parliamentary elections. This turn-around - hitherto the Movement had stood self-consciously aloof from directly politic matters - was caused largely by a widespread feeling of grievance against the discrimination the Societies were suffering as a result of wartime legislation. Specifically, the Government's handling of rationing arrangements and its decision that the Cooperative stores should be liable for excess profits tax, and the perceived prejudice of local tribunals in enforcing conscription against Cooperative employees instilled the view that direct political action and redress were necessary.[1] The move also

---

1. T.F. Carbery, Consumers in Politics (Manchester, 1969), pp. 17-18.

reflected, at least among some Cooperators, a wider vision of the Movement's task and purpose; there were some that felt that true Cooperation required more than diligent shopkeeping - to fulfil its ideals, its philosophy had to to be spread and practised politically too.[1]

The political impact of the Cooperative movement and the flow and cross-currents of its various activities will be examined in the following chapter. We will look first at Cooperative politics as such and, then, at Cooperation's always ambiguous relationship with the other sections of the Labour movement. The last part studies briefly the work and influence of the guilds and the Cooperative movement's other primarily non-political bodies. In conclusion, we attempt some overall assessment of the role played by the Cooperative movement in working-class politics in our period of study

---

1. S. Pollard, 'The Foundation of the Cooperative Party' in A. Briggs, J. Saville (eds), Essays in Labour History, 1886-1923 (1971).

9.2 Cooperative Politics

When Labour activists sought to encapsulate the vision of the future which they upheld, the form of words that they used most often was the phrase the 'Cooperative Commonwealth'. Here, Cooperation transcended any narrowly commercial meaning and stood forth as the antithesis of all the greed and destructive competition held to characterise contemporary social relations. The phrase invoked a picture of free and equal individuals working harmoniously together to benefit the social and economic democracy of which they were members; in a sense, it acted as a compressed description of the socialist ideal and it would be mistaken to view its content as specifically Cooperative.

There were, however, Cooperative politicians to whom Cooperation stood in its own right as both the means and the end of social emancipation. To such as these, the Cooperative stores were not merely a manifestation of working-class consumerism but were an instrument of social and economic reform. The opening of a new shop could be heralded as a 'triumph of democracy...an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace', and, while they delighted in the commercial strength and growth of the Movement, they deprecated any narrow-minded concern with Cooperative finance or the 'divi'.[1] When A.V. Alexander took part in a Cooperative trade propaganda campaign, he was nonetheless keen to emphasise that:[2]

> The Cooperative movement did not mean the keeping of shops but the substitution of a system based upon justice, equity and love for one based on greed, competition and hate.

More practically in this light, the stores were thought to prefigure the economic mode of the Cooperative Commonwealth and to be subverting the capitalist status quo from the inside. John Hammond, a keen Cooperator in

---

1. The Wheatsheaf (Birmingham Industrial Cooperative Society edition), June, 1919.
2. S.D.I., 5;2;1927.

King's Norton, argued that:[1]

> By purchasing your goods from the Cooperative Society, you produce for use; by feeding and clothing yourself by the aid of the Cooperative movement, you produce your own emancipation.

Such thinking was not uncommon among the most active Cooperators - those people who formed the Boards of Management, Cooperative Education Committees guild secretariats and suchlike - but though a highly politicised view of the world, it was not one susceptible of immediate translation into practical politics. Insofar as it proclaimed an anti-statist creed of working-class self-help and initiative, the Cooperative vision was in a real sense non-political. It required not so much legislative interference as legal freedom and it was natural that that the Cooperative Representation Committees founded in 1918 were primarily concerned to remove discrimination rather than promote positive policies of state or municipal intervention. The Cooperative Party (as the Movement's political wing was re-named in 1919 was founded on essentially negative premises and lacked a clearly defined purpose and programme.

This was to leave it in an ideological no-man's land but, in practice most Cooperative political activists were drawn by instinct, sympathy and electoral reality into some form of working alliance with the Labour Party. The process was always a contested one. Sincere Cooperators, as well as those with a political axe to grind, worked assiduously to put an end to the Cooperative movement's political work and, in particular, its links with Labour. But once the decision for political action was taken, a modus vivendi with Labour became inevitable. For one thing, those people who joined the Cooperative Party were just those who were likely already to be Labour sympathisers and keen trades unionists. Cooperators who did not share these leanings could still find a useful and ideologically satisfying role in Cooperative management and education and so, to some extent, a natural division of responsibilities could arise. Equally, though the

---

1. King's Norton Labour News, July, 1928.

Cooperative Party lacked specific policies, its ethos of constitutional respectability and gradualistic reform brought it broadly into line with the Labour Party. In any case, the similarities of the two parties made competition at the polls seem a foolish and mutually damaging option.

In practice, most Cooperative and Labour activists saw no contradiction in their work in the two working-class parties though their assessment of the relative importance of each might vary. The most prominent Cooperative politician of the twentieth century, A.V. Alexander, was a minister in the first Labour government and a Cabinet member in the second and third. Though always assiduous in defending the Cooperative movement's interests in parliament, his politics otherwise appear indistinguishable from those of his Labour colleagues.[1] Fred Longden, elected Labour and Cooperative M.P. for Deritend in 1929, had originally stood as a Labour candidate and had formerly been a member of the ILP's National Administrative Council.[2] In effect, most working-class political activists assumed a division of labour between the two movements: Labour was concerned with the legislative improvement of working-class conditions and in this work the Cooperative Party was its assistant; Cooperation itsel was engaged in an economic attack on the capitalist mode of production. This analysis of the movements' shared goals and mutual responsibilities was expressed at its most sophisticated by Fred Longden:[3]

> The basic propositions of both parties must push society on to socialisation and workers' control. At the moment, the primary work of Labour is to protect the selling of labour-power and generally improve the standard of life of the dispossessed...On the other hand, Cooperation represents the immediate attempt at control and socialisation by attacking big business in the industrial sphere. That is, whilst Labour aims at future socialisation through Parliamer Cooperation is accomplishing it piecemeal now.

We turn now to examine what these ideological ambiguities and affinities meant to the evolution of working-class politics in Birmingham and Sheffielc

---

1. J. Bellamy, J. Saville (eds), Dictionary of Labour Biography, vol. 1 (1972), pp. 11-14.
2. ibid, vol. 2 (1974), pp. 239-42.
3. T.C., 12;1;1922.

The Birmingham and District Cooperative Representation Council was formed in January, 1918 as a joint venture of the three local retail societies and two local productive societies. Its total membership was 174, made up of 55 representatives from the Societies' General Committees, 29 from their Educational Committees, and 8 representatives respectively of their officials and employees. 48 delegates were elected by the guilds and a further 26 by the membership at large. An Executive Committee was formed by the election of one representative from each of these different interests

The Council's first task was to select candidates for the General Election which was expected at the end of the War. After negotiations with the Borough Labour Party, it was agreed to contest King's Norton and Sparkbrook Divisions, and candidates were chosen - Cllr. Tom Hackett in King's Norton and Frank Spires in Sparkbrook - whose record of work in Labour and trades union circles also did much to recommend them to Labour Party members.[2] It was further agreed to establish Divisional Cooperative Committees in these areas and, one year later, ward committees too.[3] Because of its unusual genesis, the Cooperative Party was very much a creation from above; individual involvement initially came largely in a representative or delegatory capacity and individual membership seems to have been very much an afterthought and one which, as the minimum subscription was set at just 6d. a year, hardly signified any firm or binding commitment.[4]

In reality, not much came of the proposal for individual membership until the Party's hand was forced by the withdrawal of the Ten Acres and Stirchley Society from political activity in December, 1922. In order to retain its interests in the King's Norton Division (which the Ten Acres

---

1. BCoP minutes, 22;1;1918.
2. ibid, 28;1;1918; 3;4;1918.
3. ibid, 29;4;1918; 6;5;1919.
4. ibid, 3;4;1918.

Society served), the Party agreed to the formation of 'voluntary' Cooperati Parties in the area.[1] The arrangement was consolidated when in 1925, afte a period of considerable friction with Labour, the Cooperative Party finally agreed to establish local ward committees, functioning independentl and formed through individual membership, which were eligible to enroll witl the Borough Labour Party.[2] It was not until this point that the Cooperati Party acquired the normal apparatus of a political party, and thenceforth the number of its local bodies rose from three in the first year of the agreement to six in 1931.[3]

The process was similar in Sheffield where the first meeting of the Brightside and Carbrook Cooperative Society Political Council (the Sheffielc and Ecclesall Society had decided not to take up political work) took place on January, 5, 1918.[4] It, too, was a body which in its early years was essentially the product of centralised initiative and control, formed of representatives and delegates of the Societies and guilds - as in Birmingham and possessing no recognisable grass roots.[5] Divisional organisations were set up in Attercliffe, Brightside and Hillsborough and a 'register of helpers' was compiled but the Party sought supporters rather than a participant rank and file.[6]

The Cooperative Party established an early claim on the Hillsborough Division and, in its own fashion, expanded rapidly. By 1924, it boasted ward organisations in Attercliffe, Brightside, Ecclesall, Hallam and Hillsborough itself but membership remained a loosely defined concept.[7] It was not until 1926 that the Hillsborough Party agreed to establish a specific membership list in addition to its ordinary roll of supporters, and it was

---

1. BCoP minutes, 23;1;1923; 20;2;1923.
2. ibid., 17;2;1925; 21;4;1925.
3. BTC Annual Reports, 1925-26, p. 40; 1931-32, p. 69.
4. SCoP minutes, 5;1;1918.
5. S.C., April, 1923.
6. SCoP minutes, 27;7;1918; 5;9;1918.
7. S.C., April, May, 1924.

laid down that members pay just 6d. a year as the minimum fee.[1]

Agreement with the Trades and Labour Council on affiliation was harder to come by and it was not until 1930 that a local pact was concluded After some hard bargaining, it was finally agreed that the Cooperative Party's Divisional Councils should affiliate to the Trades and Labour Council on the basis of an affiliation fee of £5 each.[2] In the first year of operation of the new arrangement, four local Cooperative Parties affiliat

The Cooperative Party found it possible to be easy-going on the question of members' subscriptions because the vast bulk of its finances came from the local Cooperative Societies who paid an affiliation fee on the basis of their entire membership regardless of their individual sympathies or interest in politics. The account books of the Birmingham Cooperative Party reveal that in 1920 the three affiliated retail societies were paying a quarterly subscription of 1d. on each of their 71,214 members. The revenue from this source alone guaranteed the Party an annual income of £1186-18-0.[4] The Party suffered from the decline of the Soho Society and the withdrawal of Ten Acres but it was fortunate that the combined Birmingham Cooperative Society, founded in 1925, went from strength to strength so that by 1931 its yearly income from this source amounted to just over £1908.[5] The financial arrangements made between the Sheffield societie and the local Cooperative Party were essentially similar though they differec in detail. In 1924, the Sheffield and Ecclesall Society (which had taken up political work in 1921) affiliated on the basis of 6d. yearly on its 27,000 members, the Brightside and Carbrook Society paying slightly less on its 35,000 membership.[6] In both Birmingham and Sheffield, the figures varied slightly according to the contemporary state of trade.

---

1. S.C., February, 1926.
2. SCoP minutes, 30;9;1930; SFTLC minutes, LP EC, 15;7;1930; 7;10;1930.
3. SFTLC Annual Report, 1931.
4. BCoP Account Books, 1920.
5. BCoP Cash Book, 1931.
6. SCoP minutes, 3;4;1924.

The financial solvency of the district parties was further eased by the fact that two thirds of the cost of any parliamentary election campaign waged by a Cooperative candidate was met from central funds while, likewise, the district party paid two thirds of the cost af any municipal campaign. These arrangements enabled the Cooperative Party to make an important contribution to the local Labour movement's electoral work. In Birmingham, 8 Cooperative and Labour parliamentary candidates were run between 1918 and 1931 with total campaign expenses amounting to £3920; in Sheffield, 6 candidates, with expenses amounting to something over £3000.[1] The financial input was proportionately just as significant at the municipal level. The Birmingham Cooperative Party ran 39 candidates between 1919 and 1931 and spent £2176 in the process.[2] The surviving accounts for the Sheffield Party are less comprehensive but suggest that something approachin £1500 was spent on its 33 municipal campaigns.[3]

To a usually hard-pressed and indigent Labour movement, all this represented considerable and apparently easily acquired wealth. The one drawback was that the Societies' political grants were a highly visible and, in some ways, ethically dubious transaction - visible because the grant came up for renewal at the quarterly meetings open to all members, dubious in the sense that only small numbers ever attended these meetings - which was alway under threat from opponents of political action or left-wing politics.

The problems that might arise as a consequence are well illustrated by the events of 1922 in Birmingham. Industrial depression and unrest had led to falling turn-over and profits for the Cooperative Societies and in Ten Acres, where Liberal influence was strong, the Board of Management decided to recommend an end to the political grant. Their view was endorsed

---

1. Calculated from the returns of parliamentary candidates' expenses contained in Parliamentary Accounts and Papers.
2. BCoP Municipal Election Accounts, 1919-1931.
3. SCoP records, CPR7; Hillsborough Constituency, municipal elections.

by the members at a quarterly meeting by 299 votes to 136.[1] The Birmingham Industrial Cooperative Society made a similar recommendation - on purely economic grounds, it was said - but here the supporters of political action were better organised and the meeting voted by 378 votes to 67 for a reduction of the political grant rather than its suspension.[2]

In Sheffield, the situation was even more tortuous. The Sheffield and Ecclesall Society first opted for political action in March, 1921 and subsequently joined up with the Cooperative Party both nationally and locally.[3] It voted to withdraw in the last quarter of 1922 but this decision was itself reversed three months later when the Society's members renewed their commitment to Cooperative politics.[4] The Brightside and Carbrook Society was not immune to these difficulties either but it managed to stabilise the situation somewhat when, in 1923, it introduced an opting-out clause for those members who did not wish to be included in the politcal subscription.[5]

In normal conditions, the grant went through 'on the nod' but on occasions Labour's opponents agitated for its suspension. In Birmingham in 1927, the Unionist Chief Agent drew up a list of Unionist sympathisers who were members of the Cooperative, containing, it was said, 1000 names. A Unionist Cooperators' Committee was formed to leaflet and canvass these sympathisers and, simultaneously, a campaign of protest against the grant was carefully orchestrated by local Unionist politicians and their press allies.[6] But, for once, Unionist machinations were defeated; Labour and Cooperative forces stood firm and it was agreed to pay the grant by 1394 vote to 894.[7]

---

1. BCoP minutes, 22;12;1922; National Labour Party mintes, NEC 26;9;1923.
2. T.C., 8;12;1923; 15;12;1923.
3. Sheffield and Ecclesall Cooperative Society Quarterly Report, 200, (1924), pp. 57-58.
4. SCoP minutes, 1;1;1923; S.D.I., 7;3;1923.
5. S.D.I., 12;4;1923.
6. BUA minutes, 8;7;1927; 9;9;1927.
   For press campaign, see: B.P., 18;6;1927, 20;9;1927; B.M., 23;6;1927; 16;9;1927; 19;9;1927.
7. B.G., 21;9;1927.

In the same year in Sheffield, the city's Conservative Association coordinated a 'short but intensive campaign against political activity in the Cooperative Movement' and some of the divisional associations established lists and committees of anti-socialist Cooperators.[1] This activity, too, seems to have brought no tangible result but its effect was to cause distractions and logistical problems for the Cooperative Party and strained relations with the Labour Party who came to consider Cooperation an uncertain and erratic ally.

---

1. Sheffield Conservative Association, AGM minutes, 8;4;1927; Ecclesall Conservative Association minutes, 9;12;1927.

9.3 Cooperation and the Labour Movement

Labour always sought a close working relationship with the Cooperative movement and never ceased to harbour hopes of a full alliance. To some extent, this was a matter of principle - the Cooperative movement was a working-class body, possessing aims which were congruent with and complementary to those of the Labour Party - but it was also a matter of more practical, not to say financial, concern. Many in the Labour Party looked covetously towards a Cooperative movement which, in terms of its financial resources, manpower and premises, possessed a strength and viablility to which Labour activists could only aspire.

At a minor level, Labour did indeed benefit from the existence and active sympathy of the Cooperative movement. Many local branches met in Cooperative Guild Halls and the suchlike, and the 'Coop' could usually be relied upon to lend some of its vehicles for occasions such as the May Day parade. But Labour was never able to cement a full political and economic partnership whilst Cooperative politics retained its independence and peculiar instability. These facts, alongside others of a more personal or party political nature, ensured that the relationship between the two bodies was charged with tension and replete with difficulties.

This was particularly the case in Birmingham. In 1918, Labour had been happy, as a result of its own financial and organisational weakness, to cede King's Norton and Sparkbrook Divisions to Cooperation but the parties' relations were soon to take a turn for the worse. The Cooperative Party was jealous of its rights and anxious to retain its control in the two constituencies; Labour, constitutionally required to organise in every division and keenly aware of the practical failings of Cooperative organisation, wanted to extend its presence. When the executive committees

of the two organisations met to hammer out a solution, the Cooperative Party argued that all the forces of Labour in the two divisions should be consolidated under the auspices of their Cooperative Representative Councils Labour's case was put by its secretary, F.W. Rudland:[1]

> the Labour Party had no feeling whatever against the Cooperative Party, it was their desire that the success already achieved should continue and grow, but we must not forget that the Labour Party was first in the field.
> The success of the Cooperative Party was largely due, in his opinion, to the propaganda work put in by the Labour Party...
> The constitution was broad, it provided for the Cooperative Council to affiliate, why not get over the difficulty by that means?

This was a non-starter but an unsatisfactory compromise was worked out by which Labour agreed to hold its hand in King's Norton until after the next General Election when the two parties would negotiate and 'if possible jointly agree' on the foundation of any further local organisations.[2]

The General Election, though, when it came in November, 1922, worsened the parties' relations rather than eased them. In Sparkbrook, the Cooperative and Labour candidate, E.W. Hampton, deliberately downplayed his Cooperative connections; he made few, if any, references to the Movement in his manifesto or on the platform, and he snubbed the local Cooperative Party by choosing to take the election editions of Labour's news-sheet rather than their special copies of the Birmingham District Commonwealth which he contended 'would do more harm than good'.[3] Hampton, though a sincere Cooperator and a one-time member of the local Cooperative Society's Management Committee, clearly felt that in this instance the Cooperative label would damage his prospects. The Balsall Heath Ward Committee of the Sparkbrook Cooperative Party showed similar misgivings when, a few months later, it went over en bloc to the Labour Party.[4]

In March, 1923, the Borough Labour Party formally abrogated the

---

1. BCoP minutes, 27;7;1921.
2. ibid.; BBLP minutes, 27;7;1921.
3. BCoP Newspaper Subcommittee, 3;11;1922; See also: BCoP minutes, 28;11;1
4. BBLP minutes, 8;3;1923; BCoP minutes, 17;4;1923.

agreement concluded two years earlier on the grounds that the Cooperative association had damaged both that Party's candidates and its own and because the bulk of electoral work in both Sparkbrook and King's Norton had been performed by Labour members in any case.[1] In fact, the King's Norton Cooperative had largely ceased to function since the withdrawal of the Ten Acres Society from political action, and it was said that the Cooperative candidate's electoral agent and all the Council's leading activists had joined the Divisional Labour Party which had already been set up there.[2]

As the national Cooperative Party fought to maintain its hold on the King's Norton constituency even as its local supporters were opposing any further Cooperative nominations, relations between the Birmingham Labour and Cooperative Parties reached their nadir.[3] Negotiations between the two national executives were fruitless but Baldwin's surprise decision to call a General Election for December, 6, 1923 forced some kind of solution. In Sparkbrook, E.W. Hampton went forward on a straight Labour ticket. In King's Norton, a conference of Borough and local Labour Party representatives and national, borough and local Cooperative representatives three weeks before polling day agreed that a Cooperative Party candidate should stand. The Cooperative Party had engaged in some political brinkmanship and won (the Labour Party had agreed to stand down only on the understanding that a Cooperative candidate would run whatever their decision but were subsequently informed that no candidate had been selected) but it was a pyrrhic victory.[4] Mrs.Barton stood on this occasion but a Labour selection conference took place in March, 1924 and she was eventually forced to resign her position on a promise by the Labour Party national agent that she would be found 'another constituency equally favourable'.[5]

---

1. BBLP minutes, 8;3;1923.
2. National Labour Party minutes, NEC 26;9;1923.
3. BCoP minutes, 23;10;1923.
4. ibid., 16;11;1923.
5. ibid., 1;4;1924; 15;4;1924.

The complexities of the Labour Party's love-hate relationship with the Cooperative Party were further revealed by events later in 1924 when negotiations between the local Cooperative Party, the Deritend Divisional Labour Party and the candidate himself led to Fred Longden, prospective Labour candidate, being re-adopted as a Cooperative and Labour candidate.[1] Here, the Cooperators were on firmer ground in that they were taking over the existing candidature of an individual already known and respected in Labour circles in a constituency beset by organisational and financial weaknesses. The Borough Labour Party unanimously opposed the new arrangemen but it was approved by the national Labour Party, a joint election committee of the two parties was formed which cooperated harmoniously, and Longden himself came within 800 votes of victory.[2]

This successful example of joint working eased local tensions and, with compromises on both sides, an agreement was concluded in April, 1925 which seemed to betoken an end to the inter-party strife. The Cooperative Party was to form ward committees which could affiliate to the Borough Labou Party on the same basis as other organisations and with the same rights and responsibilities. The Labour Party, for its part, would accept joint Cooperative and Labour candidatures and would seek to assist their return.[3]

Developments in local politics were not, however, to facilitate such hopes. In the late 1920s, the Birmingham Labour movement was, as we have noted, riven by left-right conflict focussed on the issue of Dr. Dunstan's candidature in West Birmingham. The Cooperative Party, which had decided in December, 1925 not to exclude Communists from its ward committees, became one arena of this struggle.[4] Matters came to a head in 1928 after the Borough Labour Party had expelled several members for their persistent campaigning on Dunstan's behalf. The majority of these members transferred

---

1. BCoP minutes, 30;4;1924; 13;5;1924; 13;9;1924; 11;10;1924.
2. BBLP minutes, 12;9;1924; BCoP minutes, 7;10;1924; 11;10;1924.
3. BBLP minutes, 20;4;1925; BCoP minutes, 21;4;1925.
4. BCoP minutes, 15;12;1925; 5;1;1926.

their activities to the local Cooperative Party branches and were subsequently to be found at meetings of both the Borough Labour Party and the Divisional Labour Parties acting as Cooperative delegates.[1] The situation reached its most absurd at Deritend where four of the five Cooperative Party delegates elected to the Divisional Labour Party's General Management Committee were Labour expellees and all were members or close associates of the Communist Party.[2] The ironic position had arisen in which the Cooperative nominee, Fred Longden, was being given full support by the local Labour Party whilst being opposed by his branch Cooperative Party.[3]

The reaction of Cooperative Party officialdom was ambivalent. At one level, organisational pride dictated that they resist the Labour Party's attempts to intervene in their internal affairs, and they protested at the Deritend Labour Party's proposals to reduce the number of Cooperative delegates on its Management Committee and categorically refused to bar from their membership those expelled or banned by the Labour Party.[4] On the other hand, they had no sympathy for extreme left-wing politics and recommended that no ward party should elect known Communists or their associates as Labour delegates.[5] Cooperative officials also worked behind the scenes with their Labour colleagues to ensure that none of Dunstan's supporters was proposed as a Cooperative municipal candidate.[6]

The left-wingers remained active in the Cooperative Party but their ability to intervene in Labour affairs was being progressively diminished. Their isolation encouraged a new tack in which a more independent line for the Cooperative Party was canvassed. In March, 1931, a motion that

---

1. BBLP minutes, 11;6;1928; BCoP minutes, 11;6;1928.
2. BCoP minutes, 1;6;1928.
3. BBLP minutes, 11;6;1928; BCoP minutes, 11;6;1928.
4. BBLP minutes, 17;8;1928; BCoP minutes, 1;6;1928; 24;7;1928.
5. BCoP minutes, 26;7;1928.
6. BCoP minutes, 24;7; 1928. In Deritend, the doubtful constitutional procedure of inviting Labour Party members to a Cooperative Party selection conference had been successfully employed to ensure the choice of the moderate candidate.

Cooperative M.P.s and councillors should vote against the Labour whip where necessary was carried but a resolution proposed by James Trotter, an active Communist, that Cooperative M.P.s should resign from the Labour Government was defeated.[1] To a large degree, this represented the high point of left-wing influence within the Cooperative Party. Earlier, the Party's Executive Committee had agreed two amendments to the constitution - that Party members should undertake to support its programme and policies and giving the Cooperative Council the right to expel any member who failed 'to fulfil his (or her) obligations to the Party'- which were clearly designed to impose a coherency and discipline that the Party had hitherto lacked.[2]

In Sheffield, it was the political and organisational strength of the Cooperative Party rather than its weakness which obviated some of these difficulties and created others. Having been conceded the Hillsborough Division, the Cooperative Party proceeded to build up impressive support and organisation in the area. But it also acted wisely in not opposing Labour organisation and in 1921 the Hillsborough Divisional Labour Party, the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council and the Cooperative Party agreed amicably that the area should continue to run a Cooperative parliamentary candidate.[3]

The pact between Labour and Cooperation was further consolidated in May, 1924 when it was agreed that the Hillsborough Divisional Labour Party would give full support to A.V. Alexander so long as he accepted the national Labour Party constitution and promised to report to the local party three times a year.. Future candidates would also belong to the Cooperative Party but the Labour Party would have the right to express in 'general (not named) terms, criteria of selection'. Municipally, Neepsend ward was

---

1. BCoP minutes, 3;3;1931.
2. ibid., 18;3;1930.
3. SCoP minutes, 8;9;1921.

to be fought by Cooperative candidates, Walkley ward by Labour and Hillsborough ward was split fifty-fifty.[1] Surprisingly, for reasons which are not clear, this agreement was terminated unilaterally by the Hillsborough Labour Party just seven months later but the de facto division of responsibilities persisted and Labour continued to endorse the Cooperati Party's local candidates.[2]

Relations between the borough organisations of the two parties worsened at the end of 1926 when Tom Garnett, secretary of the Trades and Labour Council, sent a letter to Egerton Wake (Labour's national agent) pertaining to the situation in Hillsborough. Garnett admitted that Hillsborough was:[3]

> the best organised Division in Sheffield but the organisation is the Cooperative Party and not the Labour Party.
> Municipally it has been the practice of the Hillsborough Divisional Labour Party to centre their activities on the Walkley Ward, and to leave Hillsborough and Neepsend Wards to the Cooperative Party... and the complaint of my Executive is that the Hillsborough Divisional Labour Party are not functioning as they should, but have allowed all control so far as these two wards are concerned to pass from their hands, and although the Cooperative Party is not an affiliated organisation...they are permitted at Hillsborough to dominate the situation.

Wake replied that the Labour Party should be responsible for all constituenc organisation and suggested that the Cooperative Party be invited to affiliat to the Labour Party as did the trades unions and ILP.[4] The Cooperative Party responded in reasoned terms that while such affiliation was 'objective desirable', it was not currently 'expedient' due to likely opposition within the two retail societies. However, a joint committee was set up to harmonise party relations and it was agreed that Cooperative candidates should go before Labour selection conferences.[5]

In the following year, 1928, the Trades and Labour Council tried to

---

1. SCoP records, CPR25; Cooperative-Labour Party relations, Agreement, May, 1924.
2. ibid., Hillsborough Divisional Labour Party to Sheffield Cooperative Party, 7;1;1929; 24;2;1925.
3. ibid., T. Garnett to E. Wake, 18;12;1926.
4. ibid., E. Wake to T. Garnett, N.D.
5. ibid., Hillsborough Divisional Labour Party to T. Garnett, 6;9;1927; SCoP minutes, 8;9;1927.

force the issue of affiliation when it threatened not to endorse any Cooperative candidates until the Party joined up formally with the local Labour Party.[1] The Cooperative representatives once more replied with a sensible exposition of the practical problems in the way of affiliation and it was agreed to continue the working arrangements already concluded fo: a further year.[2] An end to these problems finally came in 1930 when in an agreement whose details were referred to earlier it was conceded that the divisional Cooperative Parties would affiliate to the Trades and Labour Council.[3]

In practice, in Hillsborough, where the issue really counted, relations between the two parties had always been good - a situation aided by the personal friendship of Albert Ballard and the Hillsborough Labour Party secretary, A.C. Meeke, and the lack of petty partisanship of both. In a reversal of the situation as it applied in Birmingham, in Hillsborough it was the Labour Party which was the field of Communist intrigue but close cooperation between Ballard and Meeke and some careful manoeuvering ensured that the Centre and Right maintained control and the Cooperative-Labour partnership was not weakened.[4]

We conclude this section by looking briefly at relations between the Cooperative movement and the trades unions. Trades unionists too believed that the different sections of the Labour trinity possessed shared principles and interests and they too had a sneaking belief that these were best manifested on the part of the Cooperators by their making the Cooperati Societies' financial resources freely available to unions and party when the need arose. This was nicely illustrated by the punch line of a resolution

---

1. SFTLC minutes, LP EC, 21;2;1928.
2. ibid., LP DM, 28;2;1928.
3. ibid., LP EC, 7;10;1930; SCoP minutes, 30;9;1930.
4. SCoP records, CPR25; A.C. Meeke to A. Ballard, 2;6;1929; A. Ballard to A.C. Meeke, 3;6;1929; J.H. Hunt to unknown recipient, N.D.

passed in Birmingham in 1925:[1]

> That the Birmingham Trades Council invites the local Cooperative societies to form a Joint Committee for the purpose of the mutual development of Trades Unionism and Cooperation. Further, we call upon the General Council of the TUC to effect the establishment of a Joint Committee of the TUC and the Cooperative Union for the purpose of securing the mutual development of Trades Unionism and Cooperation and united action in the form of economic aid in all disputes.

The up-shot of this was the formation in July, 1925 of the Birmingham and District Council of Trades Unionists and Cooperators, comprising seven members of the Trades Council and seven representatives of the local retail societies, with the espoused aims of encouraging all Cooperative members and employees to become trades unionists, and all trades unionists to become Cooperators, of establishing good industrial relations in the Cooperative Societies, of getting the trades unions to bank with the Cooperative Wholesale Society, and of engaging in joint educational propaganda.[2] If the unions went in with the ulterior aim of getting their hands on the Cooperative movement's cash, it wisely was not mentioned. Apart from the publication in August of a four-page leaflet entitled 'A Call to the Trade Union Non-Cooperator', the Council seems to have led a highly inactive existence.[3]

There were, nevertheless, occasions when the Cooperative Societies did come to the aid of striking trades unionists. In 1919, the Brightside and Carbrook Society loaned ASLEF £650 during the national railway strike.[4] In 1926, the Birmingham Cooperative Society agreed to honour all trades union cheques drawn during the General Strike and consequently cashed cheques from 36 unions to the value of £28,000.[5] The Birmingham Society also issued £250-worth of food vouchers to the striking railwaymen and later

---

1. BTC minutes, 21;3;1925.
2. T.C., 31;7;1925.
3. BTC Annual Report, 1925-26, p. 9.
4. BTC minutes, 18;5;1926; R.P. Hastings, 'Aspects of the General Strike in Birmingham, 1926', Midland History, II, 4, (1974), p. 271.

made a £250 donation to the Miners' Federation.[1] This was genuine enough evidence of fellow-feeling and shared working-class sympathies but the Cooperative Societies were (understandably, given the nature of their business and the scale of their responsibilities) essentially cautious and conservative institutions and they were careful to ensure that most of these outgoings were fully guaranteed and that the unions concerned were likely to repay..

Trades union and Cooperative relations were not always so smooth. As well as being working-class activists, the Cooperators were also employers who applied business criteria to their financial dealings. Despite the formal identity of interests between employers and employed, strikes were far from unknown at Cooperative establishments and, in our period, there were disputes involving some 1850 Sheffield members of the Amalgamated Union of Cooperative Employees in September, 1919, and 500 woodworking trades unionists employed in the Cooperative Wholesale Society's piano and cabinet factories in Birmingham in October, 1931.[2]

Relations also came under strain in a dispute between the National Amalgamated Union of Life Assurance Workers and the agents of the Cooperative Insurance Society (CIS) in 1922. In both Birmingham and Sheffield, the Life Assurance Workers protested fiercely that the CIS had been 'poaching' former clients of its members by unfair methods.[3] There would seem to have been some justice in the charge because the Birmingham Trades Council passed a resolution condemning CIS practices and the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council went so far as bar the CIS agents from affiliation.[4] Resentment reached such a pitch that in the Washwood Heath municipal electio

---

1. Birmingham Railway Central Strike Committee minutes, 6;5;1926; BTC minutes, 5;6;1926.
2. S.D.I., 21;9;1919; B.G., 9;10;1931.
3. BTC minutes, 15;3;1922; SFTLC minutes, 24;1;1922.
4. BTC minutes, 2;9;1922; SFTLC minutes, 25;5;1922; 5;12;1922.

in November, 1923, a Life Assurance Workers' official and prominent Labour Party activist, S.L. Treleavan, stood as an Independent candidate in opposition to a CIS agent standing under Labour Party auspices.[1] This dispute was not as trivial as it might otherwise appear because insurance agencies - which kept them free of possible victimisation and allowed them to organise their own time - were a major source of employment for Labour activists. In the 1920s, five Sheffield Labour councillors and eight of their Birmingham counterparts worked as insurance agents.

Conflict makes news whilst harmony passes without trace, and it is necessary to remember this in any assessment of Cooperative and Labour movement relations. There were, of course, many instances of quiet cooperation and mutual support which went unremarked in the contemporary record. The Cooperative movement, for example, took on many Labour activists whose political work and commitment had made them unemployable elsewhere.[2] Nevertheless, the events detailed here stand as a sharp corrective to any idealised view of the Labour trinity. The interests of the three wings of the Labour and Cooperative movement were not identical and the amour-propre of each was easily aroused in antagonism to the activities of another. In this case, the forward march of Labour sometimes more nearly resembled a three-legged race in which well-meaning but uncoordinated partners succeeded only in impeding each other's progress. It is not, then, altogether surprising that the editors of both the Town Crier and Sheffield Forward were among those who called for an end to independent Cooperative political activity, arguing that the Cooperators' efforts and money would be better contributed to a comprehensive Labour

1. BBLP minutes, 'Report on National Amalgamated Union of Life Assurance Workers-CIS Dispute', N.D. [December, 1922].
2. Cllr. Percy Shurmer, who was employed by the Post Office until his dismissal in 1926 for General Strike activities, was subsequently found clerical work by the Birmingham Cooperative Society.

Party.[1] Equally, it is not surprising that, despite the two parties' common features, little came of such calls. The Cooperative Party was established as an independent organisation which possessed its own resources and developed therefore its own organisational interests and momentum. This alone accounted for many of the inter-party difficulties. But, as importantly, the Party also possessed, though its politics were ill-defined, a distinctive form an ethos which could not simply be assimilated into the Labour mainstream. An examination of the Cooperative subculture may bring this out more clearly.

---

1. T.C., 8;12;1922; S.F., April, 1923.

9.4 The Cooperative Subculture

As a principally non-political organisation, the Cooperative movement offered a broader and richer subculture than did its associates in the working-class movement. Whereas social and cultural activities were basically subordinate to the real concerns of Labour and the trades unions, they were part of the essential fabric of Cooperation. While Labour was founded with a purely political purpose and its social side was developed later, Cooperation began life as an economic and social undertaking and never made politics its sole or primary concern. These facts left a fundamental imprint on the nature of the Cooperative movement's organisation and ethos and should inform our interpretation of the Cooperative subculture's political influence.

Looking at the Cooperative Party first, we see that, though it was as male-dominated as most political parties in its higher echelons, at the grass roots its membership was principally female. Of the 47 members of the Yardley Cooperative Party in 1932 (the first date for which we have details) 30 were women and 17 men.[1] And at least at the immediately local level, this dominance seems to have been reflected in the Party's executive structure; in the Aston branch, for example, three of the Party's five officers and four of its six-strong committee were women. There was, though characteristically little sexual equality in the Party's Catering Committee which was entirely female.[2]

It may partly have been this strong female input which explained the Cooperative Party's heavy emphasis on the social side of its activities. Like some of the Labour Party Women's Sections and youth sections mentioned

---

1. Yardley Cooperative Party, Membership Contributions Book, 1932.
2. Aston Cooperative Party minutes, 20;2;1930.

earlier, the Hillsborough Cooperative Party and its Women's Section both organised a four-weekly programme in which play-readings and socials alternated with addresses and political business. Both also advertised the musical items which were a feature of every meeting.[1] The Longley and Norwood Cooperative Party, founded in Sheffield in 1930, promised a similar mix of entertainment and politics.[2] While something of this stress on extra-political activities may have been due to the particular nature of the Hillsborough organisation, an examination of the minute books of the Aston Cooperative Party in Birmingham reveals that this branch too, which offered lectures at most meetings and a full programme of socials and outings, was anxious to leaven its formal political work with more broadly educational or recreational activity. In this respect, there were considerable similarities between the Cooperative Party's local branches and the movement's members' guilds which we examine next.

In the interwar period, the Cooperative guilds were, in terms of their numbers and membership, one of the most important forms of working-class social organisation in Britain. In 1924 for example, the Birmingham Industrial Cooperative Society ran a total of 24 guilds (15 women's and 9 men's) and Sheffield and Ecclesall some 13 (11 women's and 2 men's).[3] In the Brightside and Carbrook area - where we are forced to rely on scattered references rather than a specific list - it seems that there were at least 19 guilds (10 women's and 9 men's).[4] The 1920s were also a period of expansion for the guilds and by 1931 the Birmingham Cooperative Society was organising a total of 39 guilds (made up of 26 women's guilds, 11 men's and - a new departure - 2 mixed guilds) with a claimed membership of some 2000.[5]

---

1. S.C., October, 1928.
2. S.C., September, 1930.
3. Birmingham Cooperative Society Handbook, 1924;
   Sheffield and Ecclesall Cooperative Society, Quarterly Report, 200, (1924).
4. S.C. and The Wheatsheaf (Brightside and Carbrook edition), passim.
5. Birmingham Cooperative Society Handbook, 1931;
   T. Smith (ed.), History of the Birmingham Cooperative Society, 1881-1931 (Birmingham, 1931), p. 193.

The espoused aims of the guilds are best described by quoting a Birmingham Cooperative handbook of the period:[1]

> These organisations, of an educational and social character, make a direct appeal to the rank and file of cooperators. In them, members will find stimulating and helpful thought and social intercourse. Their objects are
> (1) To arouse, maintain and increase interest on the part of cooperators in the working and development of the Cooperative movement,
> (2) To make known the principles of Cooperation and assist towards their universal application in human affairs.

These worthy goals were achieved by a programme of weekly meetings in which lectures (usually on Cooperative affairs but sometimes of more general interest) were interspersed with visits and outings, social events and the occasional session devoted wholly to guild organisation or Cooperative business. We can clothe these bare bones with more detail through the fortunate survival of the minute books of the Harborne men's and women's guilds which show that on most weeks delegates would be selected to attend local Cooperative or Labour conferences, the members would subscribe to favoured good causes, and arrangements would be put in hand for the guilds' socials, children's parties and Cooperators' day tableaux. Most meetings were opened by a song - 'Jerusalem' was a favourite - accompanied by the guild piano and a brief introductory address by the guild president.[2]

A large part of the guilds' work centred on specifically commercial concerns. The members wanted the trading side of the Cooperative movement to succeed and prosper and, to this end, the ladies of the Manor Women's Cooperative Guild twice canvassed their newly-built estate on behalf of the Brightside and Carbrook Society.[3] In Birmingham in 1931, the District Committee of the Women's Cooperative Guilds organised a large conference and city-wide campaign to increase Cooperative membership and trade. But in the Cooperative movement, even apparently routine business

---

1. Birmingham Cooperative Society Handbook, 1928, p. 41.
2. See Appendix H for a sample programme.
3. S.C., March, 1928.

interests could be invested with considerable moral purpose - as the main speakers' words on this occasion illustrate:[1]

> We should not be in the guild for what we can get out of it but what we can put in. It is our job to get on the doorstep and so lead an attack on the multiple shops. Go into the Campaign determined to increase our membership, capital, trade and make the whole world feel the grip of Cooperation.

On the other hand, the members were also concerned that they should receive good service and high quality products, and the Birmingham committee complained on several occasions about the standard of treatment and goods purveyed by the local Society.[2] Indeed, there were some in the wider Labour movement who looked on the guilds cynically as being composed principally of rather haughty 'dividend-snatchers' - self-consciously respectable women whose main interest lay in the discount they received for their custom.[3] This was certainly not the whole story but there is no doubt that financial concerns were sometimes uppermost. The secretary of the Harborne Men's Cooperative Guild reproved his membership when they discussed the issue of the political grant:[4]

> The majority either forgetting the past good work of the Society, or thinking that they had never been sufficiently rewarded for being members, were keen on the dividend and against the prices charged at the Stores, stating that several shilling in the £ *[sic]* could be saved by dealing with private traders.

The interests of the guilds did extend further than this, though, and the women's guilds were an important base of what were, in contemporary terms, quite feminist attitudes. When the national president of the Women's Cooperative Guild addressed a conference in Birmingham, she urged that one of their 'foremost objects was to press forward the claim of women for equal rights of citizenship and opportunity'.[5] In practice, the local guilds fulfilled this injunction in a number of ways. Simply by their

---

1. Birmingham District Committee WCG minutes, 28;10;1931.
2. ibid., 5;2;1925; 5;3;1925; 5;1;1928.
3. Interview with Cllr. Albert Jackson.
4. Harborne MCG minutes, 20;3;1922.
5. Birmingham District Committee WCG minutes, 30;9;1924.

existence, they were a forum in which women could gain self-confidence by organising and socialising independently from men; a joint guilds' meeting held in 1920 pointedly refused to have a male chairman in control.[1] More overtly, the guilds sought to protect and extend women's interests by district conferences organised on, amongst other things, the 1922 Criminal Law Amendment Act (held to prejudice the rights of women forced into prostitution) and birth control.[2] At one, Marie Stopes ('received with an outburst of enthusiasm and clapping of hands') argued vehemently that women were 'enslaved in their motherhood' and had the right to control their own fertility.[3] The Guilds' District Committee also affiliated to the Workers' Birth Control Group founded in Birmingham in 1924 - an organisation which received additionally the strong support of a large number of Labour Party Women's Sections.[4]

As to their direct involvement in politics, the guilds were ambivalent. A speaker at the Harborne women's guild contended that the guilds were 'political in character' but urged that 'only Cooperative politics should be practised therein' and left open the question as to what the Cooperative movement's politics really were.[5] One area which was definitely felt to be of legitimate concern was peace. The Birmingham District Committee organised a large conference on disarmament while, locally, Harborne had a number of speakers from contemporary campaigns against war and militarism.[6]

It was also accepted that the guilds would support the local branches of the Cooperative Party by appointing delegates to their meetings and sending small donations to finance Cooperative election battles.[7] Less

---

1. Birmingham District Committee WCG minutes, 27;2;1920.
2. ibid., 24;1;1922; 8;11;1923; 3;2;1927.
3. ibid., 8;11;1923.
4. ibid., 30;9;1924; T.C., 5;6;1925.
5. Harborne WCG minutes, 5;9;1928.
6. Birmingham District Committee WCG minutes, 17;3;1927; Harborne WCG minutes, 22;9;1926; 14;11;1928.
7. Aston Cooperative Party minutes, 3;4;1930; 19;11;1930; Deritend Labour Party Election Accounts, 1924.

frequently, they would give money and logistical support to the Labour Party. In Birmingham at different times, the Sparkhill Women's Cooperative Guild and the Small Heath Men's Cooperative Guild were both affiliated to the Borough Labour Party; in Sheffield, the application of two Cooperative Women's Guilds to affiliate to the Trades and Labour Council had to be rejected due to their constitutional ineligibility.[1] The Allen's Cross women's guild in Birmingham was in no doubt where its political sympathies lay and even went so far as to canvass for Labour's municipal candidate.[2] The Tinsley Men's Cooperative Guild went one step further when, in 1922, it successfully ran two of its members in the local elections for the Board of Guardians.[3]

Such direct intervention in the political field was, however, rare. The nature and degree of the guilds' political activism varied considerably according to their memberships' sensibilities and the sympathies of their leaders of opinion. Some guildswomen did become exceptionally active politically. Eleanor Barton, who was a Cooperative and Labour councillor in Attercliffe from 1919 to 1922 and the Cooperative parliamentary candidate in King's Norton in 1922 and 1923, was the assistant secretary and (after 1925) the secretary of the national Women's Cooperative Guild, and her work in the guilds' movement was always accompanied by a keen awareness of the political goals it could help achieve.[4]

In general, though, the interests of the guilds reflected the full range of the Cooperative movement's activities and, in this spectrum, party politics played but a small part. The guilds operated in and encouraged an environment which was broadly politicised but rarely crudely political,

---

1. BTC Annual Reports; SFTLC minutes, DM 26;2;1926.
2. Interview with Mrs. Potter.
3. S.C., May, 1922.
4. J. Bellamy, J. Saville (eds), op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 38-40.

and they instilled an ethos which was humanitarian first and specifically working-class second. At the Harborne women's guild, for example, a sewing party for the miners was followed by a whist drive to raise money for the Cripples' Fund and a donation to the Women's Welfare Centre, and the Birmingham District Guilds' Committee sponsored a cot in the local Crippled Children's Home while, in 1926, sending money and clothes to the Blaina Cooperative Society in South Wales.[1] Insofar as these attitudes had a clear political expression, the gentle reformism and pious aspirations of the Cooperative Party undoubtedly came closest to matching it but Labour too, through its own share of these qualities and its close association with the Cooperative Party, was also looked on sympathetically.

As an indication of the overall impact on working-class life made by the Cooperative movement, it is worth looking at briefly the range of its business and educational facilities in Birmingham and Sheffield. In Birmingham in 1931, the two Cooperative retail societies boasted a total membership of 183,788 people (18.3 per cent of the city's population) and a combined annual turnover of over £5m.[2] The Birmingham Cooperative Society was the third largest in the country (after London and the Royal Arsenal), employing 3674 people in 271 branches, with capital amounting to some £2,144,000.[3] The Sheffield Societies had 104,591 members (20.4 per cent of the local population) and annual sales worth over £2½m. They ran some 257 shops and branches, providing every good and service of which a working-class consumer might conceivably have need.[4]

It was this underlying strength which enabled the Cooperative movement to finance a wide range of educational and cultural activities. All the

---

1. Harborne WCG minutes, 19;12;1928; 20;2;1929.
   Birmingham District Committee WCG minutes, 1;12;1921; 4;2;1926
2. T. Smith (ed.), op. cit., p. 226; H. Vickrage, Seventy-Five Years of Cooperative Endeavour. A History of...Ten Acres (Birmingham, 1951).
3. Birmingham Cooperative Society, Interesting Facts and Figures for Prospective Members (Birmingham, 1931), pp. 2-3.
4. Sheffield Year Book, 1932.

retail societies organised their own Education Committees sponsored, like the Cooperative Party, by an annual grant of so many pence per member. (In Birmingham, the amount varied between 4d. and 8d. a member depending on trading conditions, suggesting that on average the Society spent around £2000 yearly on its educational work.[1]) The major task of the Education Committees was to manage the Cooperative's classes. These were split fairly evenly between vocational courses in accountancy, salesmanship and suchlike which were conducted primarily for the Movement's employees, and the more general interest courses in topics as varied as Cooperative history, music and psychology which were designed to appeal to the ordinary Cooperator. In Birmingham in 1931, 75 classes were run, catering for some 2200 students.[2] While the classes were certainly not in any crude sense propagandistic, they were infused with the Cooperative ethos and the children's classes in particular and the junior guilds (called Comrades' Circles) inculcated an idealised understanding of the Cooperative story taught through a hagiographic description of the work of such men as Robert Owen and the Rochdale Pioneers. Nor was the musical side neglected; the Birmingham Education Committee coordinated the activities of two choirs and a symphony orchestra, the Sheffield and Ecclesall Committee ran its own orchestra.[3]

One final manifestation of the contemporary strength of the Cooperative movement is worth recording - the annual Cooperators' Days held in both Birmingham and Sheffield. In Sheffield, it was claimed that over 70 vehicles - with a range of tableaux and Cooperative trade advertisements - took part in 1924 to form a procession over a mile long; around 10,000 people were participating each year in the mid-1920s.[4] In Birmingham, total attendances of around 14,000 were claimed for the two annual demonstrations

---

1. T. Smith (ed.), op. cit., p. 187.
2. ibid., p. 191.
3. ibid., p. 189; S.C., April, 1930.
4. S.C., August, 1924; May, 1925.

organised by the local Movement; 7000 adults took part in the July Cooperators' Day and a similar number of children celebrated the special Children's Day organised during the summer holidays.[1]

For those most deeply involved, Cooperation offered not merely a structure of activism and a social outlet but an alternative worldview. It taught a history whose heroes were not the kings and queens of England but those, such as John Ball and Wat Tyler, who had stood up for the oppressed; whose progress was not measured by imperial expansion but in the slow and inexorable rise of working people from servitude and poverty. It produced song-books and plays with a message full of faith and promise and almost naively convinced of the benevolent capacities and will of human nature.[2] It provided both haven and hope for those whose class aspirations were most strongly infused by a profound ethical humanism.

The Cooperative movement had within it the potential and the propensity to become an expansive counter-culture which the Labour Party did not have. But, despite the high hopes of its more committed members, it did not fulfil this role. Viewed as a political animal, the Cooperative movement had the failings of its virtues; the generosity of spirit and inevitabilism which were the source of its inner strength deprived the Movement of an external aggression and cutting edge which might have fortified its reforming role and possibilities. Ultimately, the threat of change that Cooperation once seemed to hold was dissipated by its very success within the contemporary structures of capitalist commerce; its teeth were drawn to reveal a mouth sucking at the teat of capitalism. The aspirations of the heart remained radical and far-reaching but the body and intellect were equipped to survive and thrive in the status quo.

---

1. T. Smith (ed.), op. cit., p. 189.
2. There is a full collection of Cooperative song-books, plays and other literature in the Social Sciences Department of the Birmingham Central Library.

9.5 Conclusion

Though to many, probably most, of their members, the Cooperative Societies were little more than trading concerns, it is clear that in the 1920s the Cooperative movement as a whole could quite justifiably claim to be considerably more than a mere business organisation. It offered its own group life and its own potentially distinct philosophy. Cooperation was still conceived of as a humanitarian ideal as well as a financial arrangement, and there was still a potent sense in which the Movement was thought of, and experienced as, a vital and expansive organism of social amelioration. In this perspective, Cooperation's commercial growth was but a manifestation of its deeper purpose and even a Cooperative store could be hailed as a 'building with a soul'.[1] The Cooperative movement has had a major part to play both in the development of a broad-based working-class movement and as an improving influence within working-class life as a whole; it is worth further study in its own right.

However, in our own study we are concerned primarily with its role in working-class politics and here it is necessary to take account of the ambiguities and ambivalences of its behaviour and purpose. The Cooperative movement was not a political organisation and this simple fact lay behind most of the tensions in its relationship with the Labour Party. Labour activists found it difficult to understand why Cooperation would not enter a full alliance so that they might fulfil together the ideals and the interests which the two movements held in common. But Cooperators were well aware that, though their concerns were congruent with those of the wider Labour movement, they were by no means identical with them. The Cooperative movement's ideals were voluntarist and were to be achieved quintessentially

---

1. The Wheatsheaf (Birmingham Industrial Cooperative Society edition), June, 1919.

by non-political or non-legislative means. Its interests, and by extension the furtherance of its ideals, required the careful husbanding of its resources and a sound commercial instinct. Here lay the means and the measure of Cooperation's progress, rather than in any rhetorical commitment to broader working-class interests - unpalatable fact though this was to those Labour politicians and trades unionists who desired a more practical demonstration of class solidarity.

In short, the tripartite split in the working-class movement between Cooperation, Labour and Trades Unionism was not, as so often claimed, a merely functional division. The interests of the working class as consumers, politicians and producers were not identical and no amount of good intentions could ultimately obscure or override this fact. The interrelationships between the three sections of the working-class movement were of almost theological complexity and we may leave the final word on the issue to a correspondent to the Town Crier who explained that:[1]

> The "Invincible Trinity" is not a "Trinity" in the Christian sense of three in one and one in three; nor even a correlated "Trinity". It is at most a collateral "Trinity".

---

1. T.C., 5;1;1922.

Chapter 10

REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS

10.1 Introduction

In terms of popular involvement or sympathy, the revolutionary parties made little impact on the working class in the interwar years. Their memberships were small and, with rare exceptions, their electoral showing was dismal. But the parties of the far Left did have a considerable influence within the Labour movement itself and, even when their role as an organised current was slight, the dedication and activism of their hardworking members ensured that the ideas and strategies of revolutionary politics could never be ignored.

In the 1920s, the chief party of the revolutionary Left was the Communist Party, founded in August, 1920 from a fusion of the British Socialist Party (BSP), a majority of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), and some of the more left-wing membership of the ILP. It was enlarged six months later by the adhesion of the Communist Party (British Section of the Third International) (CP/BSTI/), a development of Sylvia Pankhurst's Workers' Socialist Federation which had been thus re-named at the beginning of 1920. But while the Communist Party rapidly assumed a paramount position on the far Left of the political spectrum, it was never allowed an uncontested dominance. Attacks on its beliefs and activities came from both its left and right and the Party itself never formed a stable bloc as its members constantly drifted out of their association with the Party and the hard choices and demands which it imposed. The Communist Party also had to cope with a situation whereby unquestionably the major representative

of the working class was a moderate and reformist Labour Party. The complex interrelationship of the Communist Party and Labour - a strange mixture of attraction and repulsion - was one of the most important shaping forces of the Party's existence. In this section, we look at the actual conduct of revolutionary politics in Birmingham and Sheffield, and conclude our examination with an assessment of the nature of the Communist Party and the attitudes of those in the Labour movement and the wider working class towards it.

10.2 Birmingham

At the founding congress of the Communist Party in 1920, Birmingham was represented by four official delegates. Fred Silvester and G. Smith attended on behalf of the Communist Unity Group (an unofficial offshoot of the SLP desiring revolutionary unity under Communist auspices), Harry Stubbs was present for the Birmingham Shop Stewards' movement, and William Brain attended for the SLP itself.[1] There were no representatives of the BSP which in Birmingham had been a negligible quantity since the city had headed a pro-syndicalist revolt against the Party's official electoral line before the First World War.

The early pioneers acted quickly to establish a local organisation and by mid-August three Birmingham branches of the Communist party were in existence.[2] The majority of their membership came from the SLP but several prominent ILPers joined, including W.T. Cardinal, Harry Shepperson and Elizabeth Eastgate who just six months earlier had been elected vice-chairman and committee members respectively of the Birmingham ILP Federation.[3] The Party was further strengthened when, in November, 1920, the Birmingham Central branch of the National Union of Ex-Servicemen affiliated en bloc.[4] The only section of revolutionary opinion which seems to have remained aloof was the CP(BSTI) whose Birmingham branch had not itself been formed until the middle of 1920. It was a small group with just ten members but they were active and, according to the branch's organiser, 'all picked men'.[5] The branch survived the arrest and imprisonment of its secretary in December and in January, 1921 was meeting weekly.[6] Thenceforth,

---

1. Communist Unity Convention, 1920, Official Report, p. 72.
2. The Communist, 12;8;1920.
3. T.C., 12;3;1920.
4. T.C., 5;11;1920.
5. M. Durham, 'The Early Years of the Communist Party in Birmingham' in A. Wright, R. Shackleton (eds), Worlds of Labour. Essays in Birmingham Labour History (Birmingham, 1983), p. 101;
   Workers' Dreadnought, 18;9;1920.
6. Workers' Dreadnought, 4;12;1920; 15;1;1921.

nothing more is heard of it and we must assume that the majority of its members joined the official Communist Party when the two organisations merged later that year.

So far as the mainstream of the Labour movement was concerned, this was a period of considerable radicalism and receptivity to the analyses and prescriptions of revolutionary politics. Earlier in 1920, the ILP Federation had organised a series of three meetings on the soviet system, the dictatorship of the proletariat and the rival working-class Internationals and, though the meetings reserved opinion on the differing merits of the soviet and parliamentary systems due to incomplete information and were heavily opposed to the dictatorship of the proletariat, those attending voted strongly in favour of joining the Third (Communist) International.[1] In May, 1920, even the secretary of the Borough Labour Party had declared himself unequivocally behind affiliating to the Moscow-based organisation.[2] This open-mindedness was not, however, extended to the local branch of the Communist Party whose application to affiliate to the Borough Labour Party was rejected by 22 votes to 8 though constitutional considerations probably determined this outcome as heavily as any ideological reasoning.[3]

(i) Political Work

In turning now to a description and analysis of the Birmingham Communist Party's activities during the 1920s, we make a distinction between its work in the political and industrial fields. In Communist terms, of course, this is an essentially artificial division and trades union and workplace politics were of equal, if not greater, importance to those of a conventional type.

Nevertheless, taking the more purely political side of its activities

---

1. T.C., 6;2;1920; 20;2;1920; 5;3;1920.
2. T.C., 14;5;1920.
3. BBLP minutes, 10;11;1920.

first, we see that the bulk of the Party's work took place in a variety of ad hoc groups and single issue campaigns. Though Harry Stubbs stood as an (unofficial) Cooperative and Shop Stewards' candidate in 1920 and Harry Shepperson twice stood as a Communist Party candidate in 1920 and 1921, the Party generally placed little store in formal electoral politics and concentrated its work in areas which won it influence in the Labour movement and brought it into contact with radicalised workers. Fred Silvester and W.T. Cardinal had been officers in the 'Hands Off Russia' Committee since its inception in October, 1919 and they continued to be active in the organisation and its pro-Soviet propaganda throughout the early 1920s.[1] Such activity had briefly stepped into higher gear when the Birmingham Council of Action was formed in August, 1920 to mobilise opposition to any allied military intervention against Soviet Russia. Five of its 26-strong committee were Communists - though only one sat as an official Party representative - and four out of five places on the Council's propaganda committee were occupied by Party members or supporters.[2] The Communists were also the leading force behind the establishment of the Birmingham Free Speech Defence Committee at the beginning of 1921, charged with the object of defending the rights of free speech in general and those arrested for sedition and incitement in particular.[3] Despite misgivings as to its heavy Communist input, the Committee received the support of a wide spectrum of the local Labour movement and official backing from the Borough Labour Party, the Trades Council and the Cooperative Party.[4]

However, as we have noted already, the largest part of the Communist Party's activity took place amongst the unemployed and it was in this area that the Birmingham branch encountered its greatest successes and most

---

1. T.C., 9;1;1920; 31;12;1920; 18;11;1920.
2. BTC minutes, 17;8;1920; 25;8;1920.
3. T.C., 7;1;1921; 28;1;1921.
4. BBLP minutes, 13;1;1921; 13;4;1922; BTC minutes, 8;1;1921; BCoP minutes, 15;12;1925.

severe problems. The success that the Party achieved in terms of its prominence and influence within the unemployed workers' movement was bought at a considerable cost in Birmingham where the authorities were the firmest of any in the country in clamping down on radical dissent. In 1921 and 1922, there were over 35 arrests and prosecutions in Birmingham for political offences and the leadership of the local Party was decimated.[1] In May, 1921 alone, Harry Shepperson, William Brain and James Trotter were sentenced to gaol and Will Chamberlain, not otherwise sympathetic to the Communist case, was forced to conclude that the local courts had become 'merely a machine for the removal of people who annoy our present rulers'.[2] Tom Dingley, a Communist organiser, described Birmingham as 'a heart-breaking field to operate in, backward workers and reactionary authorities presenting a stiff opposition'.[3] Despite these difficulties, the Party retained around 100 members (80 male, 20 female) in 1922 but by 1924 local organisation had become so weak that it was necessary to suspend the District Party Committee and attach its branches directly to Party headquarters.[4]

Neither could the Party achieve much impact on the Birmingham Borough Labour Party. The high-point of Communist influence came in 1924 when the Borough Labour Party agreed to apply individual discretion on the acceptance or otherwise of Communist delegates in response to a Trades Council resolution urging freedom for the trades unions to select as their representatives anyone willing to sign the Labour Party constitution.[5] (Communists were happy to swallow their principles in this way should the need arise.) But in the following year, the Borough Labour Party reversed this decision and opposed suggestions that the Communist Party be allowed to

---

1. The Communist, 14;10;1922.
2. T.C., 27;5;1921.
3. Solidarity, 18;2;1921.
4. CAB24/132/3609, PRO; Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom, 12;1;1922;
   Speeches and Documents of the 6th. Conference of the CPGB, 1924, p. 53.
5. BBLP minutes, 1;5;1924; BTC minutes, 5;4;1924.

affiliate nationally to Labour or that individual Communists should be eligible for Labour Party membership.[1]

While the Communist Party was never able to secure much pull in the Birmingham Labour mainstream, it did, through the evolution of events in the Dunstan affair, come to play an active part in local left-wing politics. The Birmingham Left-Wing Committee was a response to genuine needs and concerns within the local Labour movement but its policies made it fertile ground for Communist intervention and the National Left-Wing Committee, which the Birmingham body supported, and the Sunday Worker, on which the left-wing movement depended, were both under Communist control. While the leading figures in the Birmingham Left-Wing Committee were not or were no longer members of the Communist Party, a number of the secondary figures in the campaign were, and at least six of those expelled from the Labour Party for their pro-Dunstan activities were card-carrying Communists.

Two streams of left-wing politics were running in parallel at this time. One was a full-blooded Communist current, made up of present Party members, interested in increasing the spread of left-wing ideas within the Labour Party but equally committed to causing disruption which might weaken Labour and strengthen the revolutionary cause. The other current comprised left-wing Labour members, such as Joseph Southall, and ex-Communists, such as Fred Silvester and Elizabeth Eastgate whose estrangement from the Communist Party seems to have owed more to policy differences and personal factors than any newly-acquired aversion to revolutionary politics as such.[2] To the latter, the left-wing movement existed in its own right as a stream of political thought and activity and was always more than a manipulative instrument of political tactics. It is notable that, when the Communist Party voted to wind up the national Left-Wing Committee, Silvester and Southall were amongst their most vociferous critics, and George Bridgen

---

1. BBLP minutes, 7;4;1925; 9;4;1925; 10;9;1925.
2. Durham, op. cit., p. 97.

stood as the Left-Wing Labour candidate for Moseley two months after the movement had been terminated nationally.[1]

In the Communist Party itself, opinions were hardening against any further attempts to work with or influence the Labour Party which, by the apparently right-wards drift of its policies and its increasingly strict enforcement of bureaucratic measures against Communist participation, seemed to be placing itself beyond the pale. It should come as no surprise that the local Birmingham conference of the Communist Party voted unanimously to endorse Stalin's New Line in 1928.[2] Though the New Line (in which Stalin claimed to foresee a revolutionary upsurge and argued that Communists should place themselves in radical opposition to all 'capitalist' parties including those of the social democratic Left) undoubtedly emerged primarily as a result of political battles in Moscow, its adoption in Britain was due to more than mere unquestioning fidelity to Comintern directives. Opinions were polarising in the British working-class movement and the betrayal of the General Strike and the subsequent right-wing reaction of the Labour leadership in particular encouraged many Communists to distance themselves from a Labour Party to which they had formerly sought alliance. Birmingham Labour's own increasing repulsion from the Communist Party was shown graphically by its ban on Communist participation in the May Day demonstration in 1928 and thenceforth.[3]

The policies of the New Line were fulfilled in November, 1928 when the Communist Party stood its own candidates in the municipal elections for the first time since 1921. Three candidates were run - Harry Shepperson, Algernon Symes and James Gardner - fighting under a common manifesto which declared:[4]

---

1. L.J. Macfarlane, The British Communist Party (1966), p. 228.
2. ibid., p. 203.
3. B.P., 7;5;1928; BTC minutes, 2;3;1929.
4. Birmingham Municipal Election Literature, BCL; All Saints', St. Mary's and St. Paul's.

> The Communist Party...enters this Election as part of the great class fight, exposing the Capitalist Parties - Tory, Liberal and so-called Labour, who mislead the workers into supporting Capitalism... This is the main purpose of our fight against all the Parties of Capitalism, we seek to mobilise the workers' army around the slogan "War on Capitalist Exploitation".

Unfortunately for any Communist hopes, though, the revolutionary upsurge appeared not to have reached Birmingham and the workers' army was decidedly non-combatant. In total, the three candidates received 258 votes and were returned at the bottom of the poll in each case. The two Party candidates in 1930 and the lone battler in 1931 fared no better. In the 1931 General Election, the Communist Party ran Bernard Moore in Deritend and gave its official support to the Independent Workers' candidature of John Strachey in Aston who thus began his career as one of the Communist movement's most prominent fellow-travellers in the 1930s.[1]

(ii) Industrial Work

Though the Birmingham Communists were not very successful in extending their influence in the political Labour movement, they performed a little better in the Birmingham Trades Council. In 1921 and 1923, there were three Party members on the Trades Council's Executive Committee, and in 1922 the Party had even been able to get its most eminent member, William Brain, elected vice-president. The fact that in both 1921 and 1922 the Council appointed delegates to the pro-Moscow Red International of Labour Unions would seem a further indication of the sway that Communism had secured.[2]

By the mid-1920s, the political balance had become more even. The number of Communist representatives on the Executive Committee fell and, though in 1926 and the following years W.T. Cardinal was elected a vice-president of the Council, he appears by this time to have been moving away

---

1. B.P., 13;10;1931.
2. BTC minutes, 7;5;1921; 2;9;1922.

from his former Party allegiances. Certainly, he had begun to oppose some of the Communist Party's more extreme industrial policies as when, in 1927, he argued against a Communist resolution calling for a general strike against the Government's Trade Disputes Bill.[1] The Council as a whole signalled an increasing opposition to Communist influence when in 1925 it twice voted against sending delegates to conferences of the Minority Movement.[2]

Something of the equilibrium in the Trades Council's political make-up was shown by events at the end of 1925 when a resolution containing the full panoply of contemporary Communist demands was moved by William Brain on behalf of his union, the Foundry Workers, and carried by 39 votes to 34. Birmingham Trades Council thus became committed to a campaign to vest full executive authority with the TUC General Council, to a Workers' Alliance, a joint programme of demands set out by the TUC to rally all workers, the formation of councils of action, the extension of independent working-class education, full rights of organisation and association for the police and armed forces, and the establishment by the Trades Councils of Workers' Defence Corps.[3] (It was a typically long-winded and comprehensive Communist resolution.) The range and radicalism of the resolution soon caused rumblings of discontent in the Birmingham trades union movement and William Brain's request for the names of those willing to enroll in the Workers' Defence Corps was passed over by the Executive Committee on the grounds that the time was not ripe for such a scheme.[4] Ultimately, at the first delegate meeting of 1926, a motion rescinding Brain's resolution because 'it was revolutionary and not acceptable to the rank and file' was carried by an overwhelming majority.[5]

In view of the course of later developments, some of the preparedness

---

1. BTC minutes, 11;7;1927.
2. ibid., 3;1;1925; 4;7;1925.
3. ibid., 7;11;1925.
4. ibid., 27;11;1925.
5. ibid., 2;1;1926.

suggested by the Communist resolution might have been welcome but the Party erred when it tried to push through such proposals which lacked the grass roots' support necessary to sustain and implement them. Such Communist victories often appeared to be more the result of better tactics and a questionable use of constitutional procedures than of any real radicalism among the membership and, as such, they often brought a counter-productive backlash which more than outweighed the initial publicity gain. In Birmingham in particular, where the trades union movement was exceptionally under-developed, it was all too easy for revolutionary politics to slide into 'resolutionary' politics which lacked any real impact on, or applicability to, local conditions.

The isolation of the Communist Party in the industrial field was shown by the General Strike in which all its members were active but in which the Party's only official input was through W.T. Cardinal's ex officio membership of the Birmingham Trade Union Emergency Committee. The Communists did make some contribution to the Strike, though, by their publication of a type-written duplicated news-letter, the Birmingham Worker, which carefully echoed the official line on the dispute by calling for full support of the miners' demands, nationalisation of the mines under workers' control, and the resignation of the Baldwin Government and the election of a Labour administration.[1] These were moderate demands deliberately in tune with the contemporary state of working-class consciousness but the Communists lacked the power to generate any mass support for them and in Birmingham were silenced by the arrest of the five members responsible for the production of the bulletin on May, 9th.[2]

In the aftermath of the General Strike, Communist activists sought to rally the trades union rank and file in opposition to the increasingly

---

1. BTC records, 'General Strike, 1926. A Collection of Bulletins, Leaflets, etc.', vol. 4.
2. BTC records, Birmingham Trade Union Emergency Committee minutes, 9;5;1926.

right-wing policies of the official union leadership. They achieved some successes as when, in 1927, the Council's delegates voted to condemn the TUC General Council circular threatening to withdraw recognition from any Trades Council which associated with the Minority Movement. But this was largely a protest at the infringement of the Council's autonomy thus implied rather than the product of any deep-seated radicalism; the same meeting voted not to send any delegates to a Minority Movement conference.[1] In the following year, a Communist resolution condemning the Mond-Turner talks was first passed by 29 votes to 21 and then defeated at the next delegate meeting by 48 votes to 46.[2] It was a close-run thing but Communist influence was certainly not growing as strongly in antagonism to offical developments as the Party would have hoped.

This was even more clearly the case in the area in which the Party increasingly placed its hopes for revival - the shopfloor. In 1926, there was not one group of the Minority Movement in Birmingham's large engineering industry.[3] Even by the late 1920s, the whole of Birmingham boasted just one factory group and one factory newspaper, both of which were found in the Bournville Works of Cadbury Brothers.[4] This small group contained just six members and clearly owed more to the unique tolerance of Cadburys towards known working-class activists than to any indigenous rank and file militancy.[5] At around the same time, one estimate of the number of Party members and Minority Movement sympathisers in Birmingham reckoned there were just 153, of whom almost exactly half were described as active.[6] The

---

1. BTC minutes, 2;4;1927.
2. ibid., 7;1;1928; 2;2;1928.
3. R. Martin, Communism and the British Trade Unions, 1924-1933 (Oxford, 1969), p. 58.
4. Workers' Life, 27;1;1928.
5. Interview with Ted Smallbone.
6. An undated list of members and supporters is included in BTC records, 'General Strike, 1926. A Collection of Bulletins, Leaflets, etc.', vol. 1. It is likely to have been used by the Borough Labour Party in its attempts to root out Communist influence in 1927 and 1928 and appears to date from this period.

survival of the minutes of the Midland Bureau of the National Minority Movement enables us to give more precise detail; in 1929, there were 43 Minority Movement members in the Transport section, 29 in Metal, 20 in Building, and 11 in Distribution in the city of Birmingham.[1] Considering Birmingham's importance as an industrial centre, in particular as a centre of metal-working and engineering, this was a record of severe disappointment for the Communist Party.

Matters were brought to a head by the sudden eruption of a non-union strike at Austins in March, 1929 which the Communist leadership regarded as a unique opportunity for the local activists to assume the direction of a genuine rank and file movement. This was always slightly unrealistic given the weakness of the Minority Movement in the locality and in the event only one supporter of the Movement was elected to the Strike Committee and only four others were active subsequently.[2] The Minority Movement remained completely without influence; its offer of help was rejected by a mass meeting of strikers and the Factory Committee, formed in the aftermath of the strike as the company was briefly unionised, refused all association with it. In the post-mortem on their failure, the Communists drew widely differing conclusions. The national leadership blamed local activists for having encouraged the workers to join reformist trades unions and in not pushing hard enough for independent organisation.[3] The local members, with considerably more realism and first-hand knowledge, felt their error lay in adopting too dogmatic a line regarding the Factory Committee's association with the Minority Movement.[4] The real lesson, unpalatable though it may have been to the Party ideologues, was that wage-based militancy did not translate readily into an industrial version of the 'Class against Class' tactic. The Party, rather than acting as a rallying-point for class

---

1. NMM Midland Bureau minutes, 27;10;1929.
2. ibid., 23;11;1929; Martin, op. cit., p. 115.
3. Martin, op. cit., p. 115.
4. NMM Midland Bureau minutes, 25;1;1930.

conscious workers opposed to the reactionary equivocation of the official Labour and trades union leadership, had alienated their support by its wilful sectarianism.

The position in Birmingham was too far-gone to be retrieved. In March, 1930, it was reported that 'there is no organisation of the Minority Movement in Birmingham' and subsequent attempts to revive its fortunes were shattered on the Communist Party's very weak industrial base in the area and its membership's preoccupation with other contemporary issues and campaigns.[1] In the first half of 1930, the local Communists were busy in Party campaigns on behalf of the Meerut prisoners, an unemployed march, the Daily Worker, the Friends of Soviet Russia, and a Textile Aid Committee raising money for the striking wool workers of Yorkshire.[2] The demands of time and energy that these various activities made simply left no space for the ambitious plans for factory concentration groups and news-letters to be fulfilled and it is understandable, given the unpropitious circumstances in Birmingham, that most Party members did not make industrial politics their top priority.

Where the Communist Party was once again more active was amongst the unemployed whose neglect by the official Labour movement enabled the National Unemployed Workers' Movement to win some support and influence in Birmingham. A second front in the Communist offensive against the Labour Government was opened by the inauguration of the Workers' Charter campaign in August, 1930. This followed a common Communist tactic in laying down a set of immediate demands (in this case, for a seven hour day, a ban on overtime, increased benefit and an end to benefit disqualifications) around which ordinary workers would fight in the hope that they would be radicalised by the struggle and by their disappointment in the demands'

---

1. NMM Midland Bureau minutes, 23;3;1930.
2. ibid., 23;3;1930; 25;5;1930.

non-fulfilment. By January, 1931, it was reported that two local Charter Committees had been established in Birmingham and that there was a third in the offing.[1] Ultimately, however, the Charter campaign too proved a flop from which it must be surmised that the working class either felt that the Charter's objects were not realisable or did not wish to realise them under Communist auspices. In all likelihood, it was a combination of these two mutually reciprocating factors and the Charter's failure must be seen as another illustration of the way in which the Communists in Birmingham, as elsewhere, were isolated from the working-class masses whom they dearly wished to represent and whom they worked so hard to serve.

---

1. NMM Midland Bureau minutes, 10;1;1931.

10.3 Sheffield

At the first congress of the Communist Party, five delegates represented Sheffield; three were present on behalf of the BSP, one on behalf of the Communist Unity Group, and one on behalf of the Sheffield Workers' Committee.[1] 18 days later, these same three groups came together in Sheffield to form the local branch of the Communist Party. It was duly agreed that the BSP and the Communist Unity Group should merge their identity but the Workers' Committee was to continue in existence as the 'industrial counterpart' of the Party itself. Subscriptions were set at the high level of 1/6 per month, G.H. Fletcher (formerly of the BSP) was elected branch chairman, W.H. Jackson (Workers' Committee) vice-chairman and J.L. Royle (SLP) secretary.[2] By the end of the year, branch membership stood at 92, of whom 75 were good on the books.[3]

The Communist Party, however, had not been successful in winning over all those in Sheffield who deemed themselves revolutionaries. The SLP was split; many members decided to follow the lead of several prominent SLPers, including their own J.T. Murphy, in supporting the Communist Unity Group but a rump stood loyally by the old party.[4] After the actual formation of the Communist Party, the SLP's membership slumped precipitously from 54 to 12 but the loyalists, led by Joe Madin, took comfort in the fact that:[5]

> The bulk of these ex-members came in during the war period...The stress of the times and the then lack of facility for doing so prevented the inculcation of that knowledge of social science and Socialist principles which constitutes the basis of efficient, enduring and uncompromising efforts on behalf of the revolutionary movement.

The Workers' Socialist Federation had also been active in the town for a number of years and continued to agitate and propagandise in its new

---

1. Communist Unity Convention, 1920, Official Report, pp. 71-72.
2. SCP minutes, 18;9;1920
3. ibid., 8;12;1920.
4. The Socialist, 17;7;1920.
5. ibid., 16;9;1920.

manifestation as the CP(BSTI). The branch, led by A. Carford, was rigidly opposed to any association with the Labour Party or any use of Parliament and resisted all attempts to inveigle it to join its larger namesake in 1920.[1] The branch attended one meeting held by the Communist Unity Group locally but, according to Carford, they:[2]

> came away all the merrier knowing that the August Communist Party, having either a majority or a minority of reactionary elements, must sooner or later break up and then our Communist Party, being composed only of Genuine Communists, would come out top at the end.

Though small in numbers, these revolutionary fractions had at least the consolation of knowing that they were the true keepers of the revolutionary flame and, indeed, something of this self-belief (or self-deception) must have been a psychological necessity in sustaining them in their arduous and normally futile struggle.

As it turned out, national and international events in the Communist world dictated a change of course for the CP(BSTI) and the Sheffield branch duly brought its 57 members into the main Communist Party in February, 1921.[3] But it was a fusion born out of tactics and political necessity rather than conviction, and in Sheffield, as we shall see, relations between the different sections of revolutionary opinion continued to be strained.

With regard to the attitudes of the broader Labour movement, it was a time of considerable fluidity and openness. Several prominent Labour activists joined the Communist Party on its inception, including Alfred Barton and Frank Womersley, both of who were billed as speakers for the new Party.[4] Barton was even selected as a Communist candidate for the Brightside municipal election and he only resigned regretfully from the Party when he learned that it would not be possible to stand as a joint Labour and Communist candidate.[5] Womersley too continued to support the

---

1. Workers' Dreadnought, 14;6;1920; 26;6;1920.
2. ibid., 8;3;1920.
3. SCP minutes, 9;2;1921.
4. ibid., 25;8;1920.
5. ibid., 19;9;1920; 22;9;1920.

electoral work of the Labour Party and was forced to cease his Communist activities as a result.[1]

This sympathy for the Communist position extended into the Trades and Labour Council itself where, in September, 1920, the Executive Committee passed a resolution by 14 votes to 3 urging the Labour Party nationally to accept Communist affiliation:[2]

> on the grounds that the Party should include in its ranks all those who were out for the common object, irrespective as to opinions held as to methods.

When this application was turned down, the local Communist Party voted unanimously to withdraw its affiliation from the Trades and Labour Council. For its part, the Council demonstrated the earnestness of its hopes for joint working by sending a letter to the local branch suggesting that the Communist Party nationally should re-draft its application so that the matter might be reconsidered. In fact, ironically, the Sheffield branch was unequivocally opposed to Labour Party affiliation and went so far as to forward this letter to their headquarters with the advice that it be ignored.[3] This perverse resistance to cooperation in a situation where, for once, the local Labour movement was sympathetic to the idea even aroused the ire of the Communist national executive, but the Sheffield branch was unabashed in its view that no good would come out of affiliation, either nationally or locally, to a Labour Party deemed hopelessly reactionary.[4]

(i) Political Work

The large bulk of the Communist Party's activity in Sheffield was taken up in work with the unemployed and there is no need here to repeat the description of Communist organisation and propaganda among the workless given in chapter 2.9. We may note, however, that, while something of the

---

1. SCP minutes, 22;12;1920.
2. SFTLC minutes, EC 27;9;1920.
3. SCP minutes, 29;9;1920.
4. ibid., 6;10;1920; 13;10;1920.

Party's independent stance was carried over in its attempts to lead and control the unemployed workers' movement, the Party did not apply its full logic and continued to cooperate fruitfully with the official Labour movement in its practical defence of the unemployed's interests. The role of the two Communist representatives, G.H. Fletcher and Mrs. Cree, in the Labour Group on the Sheffield Board of Guardians was the clearest evidence of this joint working but it was manifested too in the Labour Party's sanctioning and support of the Unemployed candidatures of Albert Smith and A. Haydock in 1921 and 1922 respectively and its endorsement of Ted Lismer as an official Labour candidate in 1923.[1] The Sheffield Trades and Labour Council further facilitated the working relationship between the two parties when it decided in 1922 not to enforce the new Labour Party rules which required all delegates to local parties to be willing to sign the Party constitution and to be independent of any organisation promoting rival candidatures.[2]

The rest of the Communist Party's political work was taken up in education and propaganda. Communist involvement with the Labour College has been discussed already but the Party was also anxious to improve the political knowledge of its membership more directly. It was agreed in 1920 that half an hour of each meeting should be devoted to discussion of Communist theory and practice, and in the following year J.T. Murphy was prevailed upon to give a course of six lectures on 'Party Organisation and Work'.[3] In 1922, after it had been discovered that 'few members had familiarised themselves with the Theses of the Third International', these were read out and discussed at the branch meetings.[4] In line with the generally strict views held on membership in the revolutionary parties, the Sheffield Communist Party instituted a one month probationary period during

1. SFTLC minutes, EC 18;10;1921; 10;10;1922; 23;10;1923.
2. ibid., Reorganisation Subcommittee, 4;9;1922; EC 12;9;1922.
3. SCP minutes, 1;9;1920; 9;11;1921.
4. ibid., 25;1;1922; 22;2;1922.

which new members were expected to acquaint themselves with Communist analysis and were allowed to attend meetings but not to vote.[1] If, in this period, the probationers failed to attend the meetings or showed insufficient activism, they were expelled.[2]

In its propaganda work, the Party was active in the 'Hands Off Russia' Committee and the Council of Action, though neither of these appear to have been as influential as their Birmingham counterparts, and in a Free Speech Defence Committee which it founded in May, 1921.[3] A 'Russian Famine Week' was organised to raise money and supplies for the Soviet Republic during a period of considerable privation in August, 1921.[4] Later that year, the Sheffield Party also founded its own Women's Section and a branch of the Young Communist League.[5] The Women's Section, in particular, proved to be a considerable source of strength, holding afternoon meetings with talks on revolutionary politics followed by tea and refreshments, active in canvassing, active too in work within the Labour Party Women's Sections and the Cooperative guilds. It was also the women who ran the Sheffield Party's weekly social and dance.[6]

The early 1920s were, however, a period of considerable turmoil for the Sheffield Communist Party and it suffered a number of ultra-left secessions - some of these occasioned by the Party's ready cooperation with the orthodox Labour movement, most by the tactical blunders it made in its attempts to organise the unemployed. In the case of R.G. Murray, who resigned from the Party in 1921, it seems likely that incompatibilities between the Party line and his support for the syndicalist-inspired One Big Union precipitated the split.[7] (The One Big Union was to be an attempt to

---

1. SCP minutes, 7;2;1922.
2. ibid., 25;3;1922.
3. ibid., 21;5;1921.
4. ibid., 17;8;1921.
5. ibid., 7;11;1921; 5;12;1921.
6. Workers' Weekly, 7;12;1923.
7. SCP minutes, 28;9;1921; S.F., October, 1922.

supersede all sectional trades unions by the establishment of a single organisation representing the entire working class, irrespective of craft or trade, directed by one central command.[1])

A. Carford's alienation from orthodox Communist politics went deeper and reached its breaking point when the Party expelled Sylvia Pankhurst in 1921. In a letter to Pankhurst's newspaper, the Workers' Dreadnought, early in the following year, Carford expressed his view that:[2]

> Many Sheffield comrades can see that the opportunists have captured the CP *[sic]*. The ILP opportunists and the reactionary elements of the BSP appear to control the policy, although there is a small revolutionary element in the Party.
> Until a Party is formed in which every member is a revolutionary and all are agreed as to general tactics and every member pledges himself or herself to go to the scaffold if necessary, we need not hope to see it do anything.

Carford lived up, at least partially, to his own strictures on revolutionary behaviour when he organised, independently from the Communist Party, the illegal seizure of a hall for the unemployed but, not surprisingly, his criticism of the Party and his insubordination led to his expulsion in March, 1922.[3]

It was presumably Carford who joined with an ex-SLPer, F. Horsfield, in forming the Sheffield Communist Workers' Group in mid-1922 which was actively propagandising for the One Big Union.[4] As for the SLP itself, it maintained an independent but feeble existence and had also expressed support for the One Big Union in a letter which had been sent to (and ignored by) the Communist Party.[5]

Though the intricacies of extreme left-wing politics are difficult to decipher after a gap of sixty years, it would appear that these various ultra-left factions were brought together, through their shared interest in syndicalist ideas, in an umbrella organisation, the United Workers'

---

1. Madin Papers, 16/1; Leaflet, 1924, 'The One Big Union'.
2. Workers' Dreadnought, 14;1;1922.
3. ibid., 23;2;1922; SCP minutes, 8;3;1922.
4. Workers' Dreadnought, 1;7;1922; 30;9;1922.
5. SCP minutes, 14;9;1921.

Propaganda Council, set up in 1923.[1] The municipal elections, in which seven revolutionary candidates stood variously as Unofficial Labour, One Big Union and SLP representatives, would also seem to indicate the existence of some agreed working alliance and concerted plan of action.[2]

On the face of it, it seems surprising that these various groupings, all of which claimed to hold electoral politics in contempt, should stand for election but clearly their purpose was primarily propagandistic - they were all returned at the bottom of the poll in any case - and marks the failure of syndicalist ideas to make any headway industrially among the Sheffield working class. Neither industrial conditions nor political developments were favourable to the ideas that these revolutionary activists were proposing and this effort in 1923 represented very much the swansong of syndicalist-inspired politics in Sheffield.

The ultra-left parties were to fade away and, while some of their members drifted back into orthodox Communist politics, others, faced with the abject failure of their policies to win any place or influence in the wider working-class movement, dedicated their energies henceforth to the radicalisation of the Labour Party. Joe Madin joined the Labour Party in 1925 and rapidly assumed a prominent position, being elected to the Labour Group as Trades and Labour Council delegate in 1927 and to the executive of the Council itself in the following year.[3] R.G Murray joined the Park Divisional Labour Party sometime in the mid-1920s and both men were founder members and committee representatives of the Sheffield Left-Wing Labour Committee founded in 1926.[4]

---

1. The Socialist, September, October, 1923.
2. The candidates and their votes were as follows:
   Attercliffe; Hardwick (Un. Lab) - 227: Darnall; Woodhead (OBU) - 188
   Brightside; Gibson (Un. Lab) - 243: Ecclesall; Wright (U.Lab) - 501
   *Broomhall; Gibson (Un. Lab) - 1690: St.Phil's; Concannon (OBU) - 578
   Crookesmoor; W. Madin (SLP) - 42.
   *No official Labour candidate stood.
3. Madin Papers, JM/10; Biographical Information;
   SFTLC minutes, EC 15;11;1917; AGM 27;3;1928.
4. S.F., October, 1926.

In the Labour movement as a whole, attitudes towards the Communist Party continued to be sympathetic though there was a more even balance of opinions on the question of official relations with the Party. In 1924, the Trades and Labour Council Executive Committee voted by 5 votes to 4 to accept the local affiliation of the Communist Party but, as this decision clearly infringed the position of Labour's national conference, it was rescinded at the following delegate meeting by some 63 votes to 51.[1] Later in the same year, the Executive Committee went so far as to elect G.H. Fletcher the Council's delegate to Labour's annual conference and, though this decision was reversed in a further meeting of the Committee, it was subsequently endorsed by the full Council by 44 votes to 32.[2]

In 1925, controversy stirred when the Trades and Labour Council decided reluctantly on definite Head Office instructions that it could no longer officially endorse the Board of Guardian candidatures of G.H. Fletcher and Mrs. Cree.[3] The decision went through by a majority of just five from 115 votes cast, and the overall sympathy which remained for Labour-Communist cooperation was shown by the delegates' majority support for resolutions urging the ending of all discrimination against Communist Party members and backing the idea of Communist affiliation to the Labour Party.[4] At the same time, opposition to the Trades and Labour Council's open involvement with the Communists was developing and in 1925 and 1926 the Council's decision to invite Communist participation in the May Day demonstrations led to the events being boycotted by the Cooperative movement and the Yorkshire Miners' Association.[5]

By 1927, attitudes within the national Labour Party were such that the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council no longer felt able to tolerate the

---

1. SFTLC minutes, EC 26;1;1924; DM 26;1;1924.
2. ibid., EC 1;10;1924; 5;10;1924; DM 4;11;1924.
3. ibid., DM 27;1;1925; 24;2;1925; S.D.I., 28;1;1925; 25;2;1925.
4. SFTLC minutes, DM 24;2;1925; 30;6;1925.
5. ibid., EC 5;5;1925; DM 8;4;1926; S.D.I., 9;4;1926.

Communist participation in its proceedings that it had hitherto allowed. A letter from Arthur Henderson himself informed the Council that it could not accept the election of Communist trades union delegates and ought not to cooperate with the Party in the May Day demonstration.[1] In fact, the Council leadership voted by a large majority to ignore the latter recommendation and Communist involvement in May Day went ahead, but they were adamant that they could not jeopardise the Council's role in the Labour Party by deliberately flouting its constitutional rules.[2] Henceforth, the Communists were allowed no official part in the deliberations of the Trades and Labour Council's political executive and the dividing line between the Council's political and industrial functions was more rigidly drawn. It was also agreed later in the year (though by a margin of two out of 114 votes cast) that the Communist Party would be officially excluded from the May Day demonstration.[3]

It is not surprising, therefore, given their increasing isolation from any permitted involvement in the local Labour movement, that the Sheffield Communists enthusiastically supported the New Line.[4] In the municipal elections of 1928, the Communist Party stood its own candidates in opposition to those of Labour for the first time, and it followed this up in 1929 by two further municipal candidatures and the endorsement of G.H. Fletcher as the Party's parliamentary candidate in Attercliffe. In his municipal election fight of the same year, Fletcher endorsed the New Line in its entirety, mercilessly attacking the Labour Government and Sheffield's Labour Council, and stating:[5]

> If I go to the City Council, I shall not go to represent the "Community" (Landlords and Factory Owners) but under the banner of CLASS AGAINST CLASS will serve only the interests of the working class, for no man can serve the interests of both sides in the class war.

---

1. SFTLC minutes, EC 5;4;1927.
2. ibid.; S.D.I., 27;4;1927.
3. SFTLC minutes, DM 27;9;1927.
4. Workers' Life, 1;6;1928; 21;12;1928.
5. SCoP records, CPR8; Municipal Election addresses, Brightside, 1929.

The height of the Communist attack on Labour occurred in 1931 when the Party stood nine candidates in the municipal elections (five named officially as Communist candidates, four standing under the auspices of the Workers' Charter campaign) and two candidates in the General Election.[1] But all this was to little avail. Despite unquestioned working-class disillusionment with Labour's record and though the Communist Party was in the forefront of agitation amongst the unemployed, the Communist claim to be 'the only Party leading the fight against the capitalists and the landlords and their Labour lackeys' fell on deaf ears.[2] The Communist Party was simply unable to bridge the credibility gap that lay between its aspirations and working-class perceptions. The New Line, far from enabling the Party to capitalise on working-class alienation from Labour, isolated it further and heightened the air of unreality that attached to its revolutionary rhetoric.

(ii) Industrial Work

Before the clamp-down on its participation in the Trades and Labour Council, a large part of the Sheffield Communist Party's work in the industrial field took place within the Council and the Party achieved a considerable presence in the Council's organisation. In each of the years, 1920, 1922, 1924 and 1925, G.H. Fletcher was elected vice-president of the Trades and Labour Council, and his successor to this position in 1926, William Ward of the AEU, was another Party member. The high-point of the Party's organisational influence occurred in 1924 when it not only secured the election of Fletcher but took four of the twelve places on the Council's Industrial Executive Committee.[3] These successes illustrate not only the

---

1. The Party's municipal candidates and their votes were as follows:
   Attercliffe; W.Joss (CP) - 208: Manor; .J. Burke (WC) - 203
   Brightside; H.Wilde (CP) - 183: Moor; Mrs. Keaton (CP) - 154
   Burngreave; Mrs.Astell (WC) - 138: Neepend; Mrs.Wilde (CP) - 125
   Crookesmoor; H.Dronfield (WC) - 216: St. Phil's; A.Hague (CP) - 309
   Darnall; G.H. Fletcher (CP) - 499.
2. SCoP records, CPR7; Municipal Election addresses, Neepsend, 1931.
3. SFTLC minutes, AGM 29;4;1924.

widespread receptivity to Communist politics in the Sheffield Labour movement already remarked upon but also the trust and respect that prominent Party members had earned through their assiduous work in the trades unions.

It was less an indication of specific Communist sympathies though, and in the early 1920s the Council twice voted against affiliation to the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU).[1] The subcommittee appointed in 1921 to investigate the question of the rival Internationals concluded not unfairly:[2]

> That as the trades unionists whose representatives form the Trades and Labour Council have not yet endorsed the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, etc., it is unreasonable to urge them to join the RILU.

There was, however, more sympathy for the RILU's later, specifically British incarnation, the Minority Movement, to whose conferences the Trades and Labour Council sent delegates in 1925 and 1926.[3]

Outside of the Trades and Labour Council, the Party had fewer successes to its credit in the industrial field though it was an area to which, because of Sheffield's traditions of industrial militancy and the Party's own antecedents, it paid especial attention. Though it was initially intended that the Workers' Committee should function as the industrial arm of the Party, the collapse of the shop stewards' movement in the economic and industrial turmoil of the post-war years seems to have rendered this forum largely valueless. Instead, in November, 1921, a separate Industrial Committee of the Party was set up which comprised of Ted Lismer, J.T. Murphy and Evelyn Rayner - all of whom had been leading members of the wartime shop stewards' movement.[4]

Through the medium of its industrial membership, the Party sought a role in all the major disputes of the period. In 1921, a special Propaganda Committee was formed during the national coal strike, and in 1922 regular

---

1. S.D.I., 4;5;1921; SFTLC minutes, EC 24;1;1922.
2. SFTLC minutes, EC 24;1;1922.
3. ibid., DM 6;1;1925; EC 6;10;1925; DM 26;2;1926.
4. SCP minutes, 23;1;1921.

consultations took place between the AEU members of the Party and the Industrial Committee.[1] But while the Industrial Committee could urge that the 'locked-out and unemployed communists in the AEU should be in the forefront of all mass pickets', it could not single-handedly reverse the objective economic conditions which were condemning the working-class movement to division and defeat during these years.[2] Industrially, the Sheffield Labour movement was devastated in the post-war depression and it was simply not possible for the Communist Party to salvage anything from the wreckage - except insofar as its activists, in most cases victimised and workless, were able to assume the leadership of the unemployed movement.

In 1924, in a review of local Party organisation, Ted Lismer urged that they try to establish factory groups.[3] Just one year later, the Party could look back with some satisfaction on a record of work that had seen the establishment of six local factory groups and one factory newspaper.[4] The Minority Movement had also been developing its presence within the local trades unions and was receiving support from, amongst others, ASLEF, the National Union of Foundry Workers and the AEU.[5]

The Communists' larger industrial base in Sheffield, as compared to that of their counterparts in Birmingham, was further revealed by events in the 1926 General Strike. On the first day of the Strike, the local branch wrote to the Trades and Labour Council offering the full-time services of J.T. Murphy and its local organiser, Harry Webb, and the use of two pages of a four page Communist bulletin. The offer was rejected and the Party went ahead independently with the publication of its own Special Strike Bulletin.[6] It was not, however, the case that this reflected any forced or self-selected isolation for the Communist current in Sheffield. Though the Party had no

---

1. SCP minutes, 6;4;1921; 3;5;1922; 6;5;1922.
2. ibid., 2;5;1922.
3. ibid., 18;3;1924.
4. Workers' Weekly, 31;7;1925.
5. ASLEF no. 1 minutes, 11;1;1925; NUFW Sheffield Committee minutes, 28;4;1926; S.F., March, 1925.
6. Workers' Weekly, 21;5;1926.

official delegates on the Central Disputes Committee, it had three ex officio representatives, and most of the mass meetings organised by the Trades and Labour Council were addressed by George Fletcher or other members of the Party.[1] The Special Strike Bulletin was avowedly established to put across the official Communist line on the dispute but it included notices for the Central Disputes Committee's mass meetings and urged support for the Committee's official organ, the Sheffield Forward.[2] The production of the Bulletin was, in itself, a major logistical achievement for the local Party; according to James Klugmann, it had a circulation of 10,000 copies and it appeared on every day but one of the Strike despite the arrests of the twelve members responsible for its production and the police seizure of the Communist party duplicator.[3] While the Central Disputes Committee stuck to the industrial organisation of the General Strike and an economic explanation of its purpose, the Communist Party placed the Strike in its political context and sought to achieve a political victory. Whilst there was probably a majority on the Central Disputes Committee who would have questioned the Communist analysis, while the Strike was in progress the two positions existed not in antagonism but in parallel and, in some ways, they usefully complemented each other.

The immediate effect of the General Strike in Sheffield was to radicalise the industrial labour movement and facilitate cooperation with the Communist Party. This was graphically illustrated when Frank Thraves - formerly a leading opponent of the Communists and the butt of fierce Communist criticism for his moderation as leader of the tramwaymen's union - became the chairman of International Class War Prisoners' Aid (an organisation set up under Communist auspices to defend and support those arrested for their

---

1. W. Moore, 'Introduction' to Holberry Society, General Strike in Sheffield. Documents of the Strike (Sheffield, 1981), p. xiii.
2. See copies reprinted in above.
3. J. Klugmann. History of the Communist Party in Great Britain, Vol. II (1969), p. 157;
   W. Moore, op. cit., pp. xviii-xix.

political activities).[1] Addressing a fund-raising rally for the group, Thraves himself stated that:[2]

> If anyone had told me a week or two back that I should be speaking on the same platform as Comrade Webb, I should certainly have expressed doubts, but adversity makes strange bedfellows...Painful incidents have come to us recently and I believe it is absolutely necessary to find funds out of which we can draw as common people.

The Industrial Committee of the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council went further when, in June, 1926, it voted by 11 votes to 8 that the Council should affiliate to the Minority Movement.[3] This, however, was to go beyond what most members would accept and a subsequent delegate meeting reversed the decision by 61 votes to 54.[4] The closeness of the votes also reflects the hard work put in by the Sheffield Communist Party into gaining position and influence within the Trades and Labour Council; at the end of 1926, Party organisers reported that 'the fraction on the Sheffield Trades Council is one of the best in the country and had many successes to its credit'.[5]

In the following year, the Council as a whole voted (by 77 votes to 46), on a motion moved by G.H. Fletcher and Harry Webb, to refuse to endorse the TUC circular prohibiting trades councils from any association with the Minority Movement.[6] The Council later deemed it inexpedient to prolong its rebellion but it gave in with obvious bad grace. In a resolution actually proposed by J.T. Baker, the leading supporter of the Minority Movement, it was recorded that:[7]

> Recognising the importance of this Trades Council being represented at the National Conference of Trades Councils in May, in order to offer more effective opposition to the arbitrary interference of the General Council of the TUC with the autonomous rights of Trades Councils in their association with an organisation of the character of the Minority Movement...this Council agrees under protest to sign the declaration demanded by the TUC.

---

1. SFTLC minutes, DM 30;11;1926.
2. S.D.I., 31;5;1926.
3. SFTLC minutes, EC 8;6;1926.
4. ibid., DM 29;6;1926.
5. Communist Party Annual Conference Report Summary, 1926.
6. SFTLC minutes, DM 29;3;1927.
7. ibid., AGM 26;4;1927.

The matter, however, was not quite closed for in 1928 a Trades and Labour Council delegate meeting voted to send an official delegate to the Minority Movement's London conference.[1] This sparked off a number of protests from local trades union branches and some, no doubt, fairly critical correspondence from the national Labour Party and the TUC. A special meeting was convened three weeks later to reconsider the decision and it duly voted by 133 votes to 44 to rescind the previous motion.[2]

As Cllr. William Asbury stated at the time, this represented the final 'parting of the ways' for the Labour and Communist Parties of Sheffield.[3] The New Line had been adopted several months earlier and, since then, G.H. Fletcher and Mrs. Cree had been expelled from the Board of Guardians' Labour Group while the Communists, for their part, had provocatively taken part unofficially in the May Day demonstration and announced their intention of opposing Labour candidatures. The effect of these developments was inevitably to mark the Minority Movement too; it was undeniably an instrument of Communist policy and it was becoming increasingly implausible to portray it merely as a forward and ambitious section of trades union opinion. To E.G. Rowlinson, addressing the special meeting of the Trades and Labour Council, the moral was clear; 'the people who are speaking tonight [in favour of the Minority Movement] are those who want to smash our movement. Let us quit this fooling'.[4] By 1928, he was undoubtedly speaking for a majority within the orthodox Labour movement. A process initiated by central diktat on both sides had developed its own dialectical logic and momentum. Little by little, reformist and revolutionary ideas and tactics had become polarised until, by the late 1920s, the differences between the various sections of the working-class movement appeared irreconcilable.

---

1. SFTLC minutes, DM 24;7;1928.
2. ibid., DM 14;8;1928.
3. S.D.I., 15;8;1928.
4. ibid.

Attitudes and behaviour on both sides of the political divide were growing more extreme and in 1929 J.T. Baker (though known not to be a member of the Communist Party) was removed from the vice-presidency of the Trades and Labour Council for appearing on the same platform as G.H. Fletcher at a May Day rally.[1] The Minority Movement and the Communist Party responded by taking the New Line to its illogical conclusion when, in June, 1930, they sought to set up a 'Sheffield Workers' Industrial Council' in opposition to the existing Trades and Labour Council. J.T. Baker, G.H. Fletcher and William Ward were among the leading figures behind the new venture but, despite this high-powered support, it failed to get off the ground.[2] Fletcher was subsequently suspended from the Trades and Labour Council but he enjoyed the confidence of his union, the Operative Bakers and Confectioners, and continued to haunt the Council's meetings as a delegate even though he had left few doubts as to his belief in their futility.[3] Finally, the Executive Committee felt that it had no option but to ban anyone as a delegate to the Council who was a Communist Party member or who had supported a candidate standing in opposition to an official Labour representative.[4] At the Annual General Meeting of the Council in 1932, this decision was endorsed by a large majority.[5]

The fruitful cooperation that had once characterised Labour and Communist relations in the Sheffield working-class movement was now a thing of the past and the interests that working-class activists held in common seemed to have paled into insignificance besides the points of ideology that separated them. Both sides must take their share of the blame for this failure and neither side received any obvious benefit from it.

Sheffield's militant traditions had enabled a longer-lived and more

---

1. SFTLC minutes, EC 14;5;1929; DM 4;6;1929.
2. S.D.I., 25;6;1930.
3. SFTLC minutes, DM 19;5;1931; EC 23;6;1931.
4. ibid., EC 4;11;1931.
5. ibid., AGM 23;2;1932.

fruitful partnership between the different sections of the working-class movement than had been possible in Birmingham but, ultimately, the internal evolution of the two cities' working-class politics had been closely similar. Local autonomies and peculiarities were being diminished as working-class activists increasingly came under the sway and discipline of national or, in the case of the Communists, international organisations and policies. Local politics retained their individuality but, in terms of the character of the working-class parties, it was an individuality of degree rather than kind and one that was becoming less significant as centralising tendencies became stronger.

10.4 Conclusion

In attempting any overall assessment of the nature of revolutionary politics and its role within the wider working-class movement, it is first necessary to clear away some of the prejudices and misconceptions which have surrounded the Communist Party. The Party was not simply, as sometimes portrayed, an alien implant into uncongenial and hostile native territory. In fact, it belonged to an authentic British revolutionary tradition and its activists, not merely the dupes of Moscow, were working-class men and women who genuinely and urgently wished to see a revolutionary improvement in the lives of ordinary people.

Probably the best way to understand the nature of the Communist Party is in terms of a natural division between two types of membership. In positions of leadership and authority were what Kenneth Newton has called the 'steel-hardened cadres' - men and women with a thorough understanding of, and ideological commitment to, Marxist-Leninist theory and an almost overwhelming dedication to the practice of revolutionary politics.[1] To give but one example of the sheer energy and hard work of such activists, we may note the case of William Brain who in 1922 was an official of his trade union, a delegate to the Labour Party, vice-president of Birmingham Trades Council, chairman of both the Birmingham Communist Party and its Midlands Divisional Council, chairman of the Birmingham Unemployed Workers' District Committee and Midlands organiser for the unemployed.[2]

It was not, of course, within the abilities of many people to maintain such a level of activity, and the majority of Communist members were ordinary working-class activists who had been radicalised by their own experiences

---

1. K. Newton, The Sociology of British Communism (1969), p. 23.
2. Straight Forward, February, 1922.

and associations or disillusioned by the failure of the Labour Party. While to some in the higher echelons there was a sense in which the Party could become something dominating and almost dangerously obsessive, to such as these it was always a means and not an end - and the end remained a straight-forward and honest desire to improve the lives of their fellow workers. These people saw the Communist Party as a radical and aggressive alternative to a compromising and equivocating Labour Party but their actual knowledge of Communist theory and tactics was often slight. Party leaders in both Birmingham and Sheffield had occasion to criticise the poor political knowledge of their membership; according to E.V. Smitham in Sheffield:[1]

> most members were not conversant with Party policy and...most members did not know the decisions of the International which are essential in [the] building up of a capable party.

Though, as we have seen, the Party tried to rectify these failings, the demands which it made on its members served to intimidate many of its actual or potential supporters and ensured a very rapid membership turnover. Membership of the Communist Party could never be merely a matter of paying a small annual subscription, as the application form used in a recruiting campaign in Sheffield made clear when it asked prospective members to sign the following, rather daunting, declaration:[2]

> I desire to make application for membership of the CPGB and pledge myself to place my time and energy, as far as I can dispose of them under existing conditions, at the disposal of the Party and will regularly pay the established fees and subscribe to the Party organ.

Party members fought a constant battle between their political idealism and the necessity of earning a living and the desire to keep time for family and friends. It is not surprising that in both Birmingham and Sheffield a number of memberships lapsed through the pressure of domestic circumstances.[3]

---

1. SCP minutes, 18;3;1924. For Birmingham, see: Plebs, May. 1923.
2. 'Special Recruiting Campaign' Leaflet, September, 1924. (In possession of Mr. W. Moore).
3. Durham, op. cit., p. 97; SCP minutes, 6;7;1921.

The ambivalent response of the official Labour movement to the Communist Party reflected a whole spectrum of attitudes and feelings in which support and sympathy merged with fear and antagonism. To begin with, though, the Communist Party possessed one great asset - the backing of the Soviet Union and the moral example of the Russian Revolution. The Russian Revolution in 1917, the first workers' revolution, coming at a time when imperialism and militarism were slaughtering working-class lives on the battlefields of Europe, was a beacon of light and hope to almost the entire British working-class movement. It seemed to hold out the prospect of an end not only to this war but to war itself, and it offered a tantalising glimpse of a future radically different and better than any ordinary people had known before.

Such unalloyed idealism could not long survive the disclosure of the problems which the Revolution faced and the publicity given to the more questionable of Bolshevik methods. But working-class activists had a healthy contempt for the capitalist press and, psychologically, they could not bear to turn their backs on that vision of a workers' utopia which had once filled them with such elation. Something of this feeling was manifested in 1920 when the no. 10 branch of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers in Sheffield passed a resolution urging their executive to apply for passports to Russia on their behalf. An official of the union stated that he knew:[1]

> personally many men in Sheffield who would be glad to have the opportunity of going to work in Russia; not only to find work...but to see Marxian principles actually worked. It is not everybody who believes the stories about Bolshevik atrocities and our men who ask to go have no misgivings as to their reception in Soviet Russia. There would be no shortage of volunteers if passports were granted.

There was a widespread need to believe in Russia in the British Labour movement and in 1924 the Birmingham Trades Council could describe the country as 'strong, self-reliant, and sounder financially, probably, than any other

---

1. S.D.I., 1;3;1920.

nation' whilst, on the following page, without any apparent sense of contradiction, it gave details of its financial gifts to relieve the Russian famine.[1]

Naturally, this idealisation of Russia was strongest amongst the most convinced adherents of the Communist Party and it is worth quoting from G.H. Fletcher's description of his visit to Russia in 1922 (where he was a delegate at the fourth Congress of Comintern) to give an idea of its full force:[2]

> Russia, the Workers' Hope! A phrase used by speakers and writers; to me a living reality after a visit to the first Workers' Republic. What a country! What a proletariat!! What a government!!! The very atmosphere is electric; totally different from other countries...Just as thousands rally to a football match in England; these people rally tenfold, with more enthusiasm, to a demonstration. I decided that this revolutionary enthusiasm is another product of the revolution. Words fail to express its greatness.

Even when a more balanced view of Bolshevism's successes and failures was taken, working-class politicians felt they had to defend the Revolution against its detractors who were, after all, the same people who opposed their own attempts to improve working-class conditions. This was particularly the case in 1919 and 1920 when allied intervention against the newly-born republic seemed to threaten its very existence. Under conditions of reaction at home, it was all too easy to see this as part of a concerted attack on working-class aspirations - as a resolution passed unanimously by Sheffield Trades and Labour Council makes clear:[3]

> we view with horror and indignation the attempt of the Government to suppress the Workers' Soviet Governments of Russia and Hungary by sending troops, munitions and money to assist Admiral Kolchak and the Reactionary Governments of Finland and Roumania. Further, we point out to British workers that this new war means the continuance of conscription and war taxation for a number of years, and that the Government which is attacking Russia is also responsible for the sending of tanks and troops to Glasgow, and for the recent circular to Commanding Officers asking for information as to whether their men are willing to act as strike-breakers.

---

1. BTC Annual Report, 1923-24, pp. 7-8.
2. S.F., March, 1923.
3. SFTLC minutes, DM 27;5; 1919.

Four years later, the immediate danger had passed but the Soviet Union was still encircled by hostile capitalist powers and was still suffering a barrage of criticism and misrepresentation. In the British Labour movement, the sense of fellow-feeling remained; Joseph Southall epitomised it when he spoke to the ILP conference:[1]

> There were plenty of people to find the faults of the Bolsheviks. There was a world of detectives to look after them, and ILPers need not join with Alec Gordon and Sir Basil Thomson. Let them look at the virtues of the Russians. We made speeches; they did things. They had trumpetted much at this conference but the walls of Jericho had not fallen; whereas the Russians had occupied the Kremlin.

Stephen Graubard has written on the British Labour movement's reaction to the Soviet Republic and has accurately portrayed the psychological parallelism that connected the two phenomena despite their radically different composition and rationale:[2]

> The Labour Party was bound to Russia by an identity of status. Organised as a protest against existing political parties, labour suffered humiliation and ridicule as the price of mere existence. Russia experienced the same treatment in the community of nations. Those forces, within Britain, who were most critical of the Labour Party, led the operation against Russia, with what appeared to be precisely the same motives. Those who compassed the Soviets' destruction, it was argued, would have been equally ready to destroy an internal socialist opposition if the opportunity had presented itself.
> The Labour Party's adversary was also Russia's enemy; how sensible that the party should be Russia's friend.

While the Communist Party was able to bask in the reflected glory of the Russian Revolution, it also had other attributes to its credit. For one thing, it was undeniably a working-class party, both in its composition and, ideologically, in its goals. Supporters of Labour links with the Communists never failed to point out the irony of the Labour Party welcoming the adherence of middle-class activists whilst, at the same time, rejecting cooperation with proven working-class activists. As William Ward argued,

---

1. ILP Annual Conference Report, 1923, pp. 82-83.
2. S.R. Graubard, British Labour and the Russian Revolution, 1917-1924 (Cambridge, USA, 1956), p. 242.

the resolution moved at the national Labour Party conference in 1923 was proposed by a civil servant and seconded by a barrister and 'would exclude from the movement such gladiators as Tom Mann while it took in Lord Haldane and Noel Buxton'.[1] When the ban was applied to respected local figures, such as G.H. Fletcher, it seemed even more indefensible.

The Communist Party was, then, widely viewed as a genuine part of a broad working-class movement and, though its policies and goals were acknowledged as being more radical and advanced than those of the orthodox Labour movement, it was not felt that they were in any fundamental way antagonistic or contradictory to those of Labour. This attitude was nowhere better seen than in the comparative success of the Minority Movement which Len Youle and others have argued represented the Communist Party's 'apex of influence'.[2] The Minority Movement presented itself, at least in the early years of its existence, as a forward section of trades union opinion and specifically rejected any sectional intentions. Insofar particularly as the Minority Movement attracted support from outside the Communist Party, there was some truth in this and the argument convinced most delegates at both the Birmingham and Sheffield trades councils who protested at the TUC's ban on relations with it in 1927. In Birmingham, A.P. Cassidy, a mainstream Labour man, remarked:[3]

> that inside the trade union movement there were always men who wanted to get ahead of the others. It would be a bad day for trades unionism if they said that these men should be excommunicated.

He was backed up by Walter Lewis, a trades union official and Labour councillor, who thought 'they should encourage healthy criticism'.[4]

But by the later 1920s, Labour sympathies for the Communist Party were dissipating and such positions were becoming increasingly untenable. At one

---

1. S.D.I., 25;4;1923.
2. 'An Interview with Len Youle', Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History, 20, (Spring, 1970), p. 38.
3. B.P., 4;4;1927.
4. ibid.

level, it was felt that Communist demands were unrealistic, or were perceived as such by a majority of the working class, and that their rhetoric alienated potential support. When Alfred Barton (who had moved a long way from his previous Communist leanings) opposed links with the Minority Movement, he argued that Labour's policy was:[1]

> to build up a Cooperative Commonwealth by the votes and industrial cooperation of the workers. It has a long way to go yet to get the masses to adopt that policy. Why spoil its chances by high-faluting [sic] talk of force and dictatorship!

And George Fletcher himself reported, of his Attercliffe parliamentary election campaign in 1929, that 'the little opposition which showed itself at our meetings centred around the "extravagant" nature of our demands'.[2]

More particularly, there was a growing feeling that the demands which Communist activists espoused were not disinterested; they were not really made to improve working-class conditions but were used as a means of securing the Communist Party additional support and influence. Again, it was Alfred Barton who expressed this most clearly when he argued that the programme of the Minority Movement:[3]

> was only a cloak for the real move. It was really a move to get them to join the Communist Party and would not make for unity but disunity of the workers.

Had he attended a branch meeting of the Sheffield Communist Party in 1924, he would have heard his position fully vindicated by none other that Ted Lismer who told the comrades present:[4]

> our position inside the Minority Movement was not just to fight for better conditions, they were secondary. But to inspire confidence and get the workers to accept the Party lead.

There was, then, a specific, if narrow, sense in which the Communist Party viewed the working-class as a means and not an end and, because of this, it was never able fully to win the trust of the people it set out to help.

---

1. S.F., September, 1926.
2. Workers' Life, 28;6;1929.
3. S.D.I., 30;6;1926.
4. SCP minutes, 28;5;1924.

That the Communist Party genuinely wished to improve the lives of working people is incontestable, but it believed that the only method by which this could be achieved in a real and durable way was through a working-class revolution. All its agitation and organisation within the working class were designed to further this goal and ordinary people, who did not doubt the assiduity and commitment of the Party, widely believed that it was using their grievances for its own ulterior ends. The limited but undeniable truth that lay behind this conviction created a barrier between the Communist Party and its working-class constituency which it was rarely able to cross.

Another handicap to the Party was its loyalty to the Russian road and the current Moscow line. By and large, Communist activists seemed unable or unwilling to make the necessary adjustments in rhetoric and tactics that might have won over a working class which belonged to its own distinct national culture. Len Youle, an ardent revolutionary throughout his political life, left the Communist Party in the late 1920s because, in his words, it was 'not basically a British organisation.../but/ was imposed on this country by the Soviet Union'.[1]

The Communists also lost some support for simpler, more personal reasons. The sheer combativity and cock-suredness of some Party members alienated the sympathies of many of the more easy-going and less zealous working-class activists. It was possible to stomach only so much criticism of one's sincerely held and practised beliefs and, at times, the Communists went too far. In 1922, the fourteen Birmingham branches of the NUR threatened to disaffiliate from the Trades Council in protest at the constant Communist attacks on their General Secretary, J.H. Thomas.[2] Five years

1. 'An Interview with Len Youle', loc. cit., p. 38.
2. BTC minutes, 28;4;1922.

later, Harry Shepperson even had the effrontery to spoil the Trades Council's biggest set-piece occasion for years - a Town Hall meeting addressed by Egerton Wake and Ben Turner to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary - by continually heckling and interrupting the speakers.[1] If there was political gain in such behaviour, it was more than outweighed by the loss of personal popularity.

Such disfavour was strengthened by the Communists' ability, through good organisation and individual effort, to achieve what undoubtedly seemed to many to be an exaggerated influence in the forefront of trades union politics. There was a certain heart-felt honesty in the complaints of a delegate to the Birmingham Trades Council in 1924:[2]

> The Communists are so pugnacious and smart, we don't get a chance. They don't forward business at all. We who come here to discuss trade union matters cannot do it because of these Communist people, who are intoducing all sorts of side issues.

His arguments echoed those put forward one year earlier in a debate in the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council on the question of Communist affiliation. According to a report in the Sheffield Daily Independent, one speaker:[3]

> twitted the "Reds" with being more bitter against anybody who held modern [sic - moderate?] views in the Labour Party than against the capitalists. He said their conduct in the Council during the year had at times almost convinced him that atendance was not worth the bother.

It is perhaps significant that, after what the Independent described as a 'year of sustained hooliganism', fewer members of the Communist Party were elected to official positions in the Trades and Labour Council in 1923 than in any other year in the early 1920s.[4]

The political single-mindedness and revolutionary asceticism of the most active Communists could create an insensitivity to the feelings of the less committed which isolated them from the class they wished to lead. It

---

1. BTC minutes, 21;1;1927.
2. B.G., 8;12;1924.
3. S.D.I., 25;4;1923.
4. ibid.; SFTLC minutes, AGM 24;4;1923.

is an irony which revolutionaries have rarely appreciated that their very zeal to win position and influence within the working class has been one of the factors which has contributed to their isolation and impotence.

But the greatest problem that the Communist Party faced in the 1920s was, quite simply, that it was living in non-revolutionary times. The British working class had, for good reasons, long-established constitutional traditions and, though it was suffering the effects of industrial depression, it was not the victim of the total economic breakdown which has preceded most revolutions. The British ruling class, though one might question its administrative competence, remained firm and self-confident in its government. There was no economic crisis or power vacuum which a revolutionary minority might benefit from and little prospect that working-class loyalties might be wrenched away from a cautious and respectable Labour Party.

As to the Communist Party's relationship with the orthodox Labour movement, it was never easy and the differences of ideology and psychology between the two sections of working-class opinion were very real. Whilst, in principle, it might be expected that two parties springing from the same class and claiming to uphold the same interests would be able to cooperate, in reality it was precisely these qualities which held them in mutual opposition. Whilst joint working in the pursuit of limited and shared goals was possible, ultimately the world-views of Labour and the Communists were mutually exclusive and, because they were both dependent on the same strata of the population, the antagonism that their competition engendered was all the fiercer.

Chapter 11

WORKING-CLASS CONSERVATISM

11.1 Introduction

Working-class Conservatism is a large and important phenomenon which in social history has rarely received the full and understanding coverage to which it is entitled. A significant section of the working class has always supported the Conservative Party but few attempts have been made to analyse empathetically the ideas and beliefs of the working-class Conservative. There are, perhaps, understandable reasons for this state of affairs. History has been concerned, almost by definition, with progress and the forces of the past that constituted, or seemed at the time of writing to constitute, the basis of history's forward march. In this schema, and set against the organisational and political growth of the Labour movement, working-class Conservatism has always seemed an historical curiosity - interesting in its own right but essentially on 'the wrong side' in that it does not fit in to preconceived notions of what was the 'proper' course of working-class history. This was always misguided and its shortsightedness has been amply demonstrated by the results of recent elections which cast into severe doubt the idea that the Labour Party has any God-given or historically determined right to represent the interests of the mass of working people.

A second problem for the historian in dealing with working-class Conservatism has been that it was not a separate organisational current. Working-class Conservatives seldom participated actively in political life and, when they did so, they were almost invariably subordinate to the middle- and upper-class politicians who ran the Conservative Party and decided its

policies. With rare exceptions, it was these people who left their historical mark in the minute books, personal papers and suchlike.

A third, related, problem has been that working-class Conservatism was not self-expressive. In contrast to other forms of working-class politics whose very existence depended on their aptitude for self-publicity and propaganda, working-class Conservatism was strangely silent. It was willingly and avowedly silent, taking its cues from the middle-class leaders of opinion and choosing quite consciously to defer to the judgment of upper-class politicians who, it was felt, had the truer grasp of current affairs and the national interest. Working-class Conservatism has been a largely mute and passive actor on the historical stage and has tended, as a consequence, to be neglected and ignored.

In the earlier sections, we tried to locate and explain the specific economic, social and political bases of working-class Conservatism as they operated in Birmingham and Sheffield. We have examined the conservatising influences of small-scale industry, the social and political conservatism of the slum working class, and the unique character of Birmingham Unionism and the continuing strength of the Chamberlain tradition. In this section, we are concerned with working-class Conservatism as a generic phenomenon - examining, in the first chapter, its ideology and ethos and, in the second, its existence as a social-cum-political current of working-class life.

11.2 Ideology and Ethos

While socialism, however vague or ill-understood, purported to be a theory of the world and a programme of action, working-class Conservatism was essentially a state of mind. Though containing an understood and implicit worldview, it consciously avoided systematic analysis or plan. Working-class Conservatism, while boasting none of the intellectual coherence and rigour - real or supposed - of its rival philosophies, did, however, possess a number of common and identifiable ideological components which were to form and shape its outlook and activity. One of these was deference (defined here as the willingness of large numbers of working people to respect and defer to the upper classes on account of the special abilities and attributes which were held to pertain to wealth and status) and several of the major studies have given the phenomenon an important part in their explanation of the Tory sympathies of many lower-class people.[1]

Deference had a number of supports but one of the simplest was a straightforward calculation of financial interests; in the words of one Sheffield working-class Conservative, 'Tories have money and money is the main thing'.[2] In more sophisticated circles, money in this context might have been termed 'capital' but, in the concretised and personalised world of ordinary working people, money was an artefact in its own right and its concentration in the hands of the few dictated the relationship of dependency in which they existed. For the working-class Conservatism, 'capital' and more-so its associated '-ism' were barely realisable concepts; their realities were a job, a weekly wage packet and their reliance on the prosperity and goodwill of an upper-class employer. Impressionistic

---

1. R. McKenzie, A. Silver, Angels in Marble. Working-Class Conservatives in Urban England (1968), chs. 4 and 5;
   E. Nordlinger, The Working-Class Tories (1967), ch. 3;
   B. Jessop, Traditionalism, Conservatism and British Political Culture (1974), ch. 2.
2. St. Philip's Settlement, The Equipment of the Workers (1919), p. 203.

evidence also suggests that those most directly obligated to upper-class individuals (rather than to a more impersonal agglomeration of management and shareholders) tended to be more frequently Conservative in their political leanings. The case of Birmingham's jewellery workers has already been cited.[1] At a less exalted level, a number of charwomen in both Birmingham and Sheffield admitted Conservative affiliations.[2] One, Mrs. Bellamy, summed up the more practical aspect of deference when she explained why she resolutely voted Conservative despite the Labour sympathies of her husband:[3]

> I looked at it from my own point of view. I thought they employ me, they pay me my wages, they've got the money. I was dependent on them, that was the cleaning jobs, 7/6 a week. What's the good of me voting against them. I was dependent on them. That's how I looked at it.

But deference, of course, went beyond such material considerations. The wealth of the upper classes was one aspect of their fitness to govern but they possessed other, more intangible, assets too including, importantly, a certain self-confidence and air of authority. The impact of the British class system and some of its principal ideological supports, such as the public schools and armed forces, in inculcating a reciprocal understanding among rulers and ruled of their respective positions should not be underestimated. It is easy to understand how the self-belief, or arrogance, of those 'born to rule' could enthrall or intimidate the powerless and unlettered masses who possessed none of their advantages of breeding and station. Working-class Conservatives chose to be governed by those whose background and connections were believed, on both sides of the class divide, to qualify them uniquely for positions of authority and command, and they rarely sought political responsibility or the public limelight for themselves.

---

1. See above, pp. 55-56.
2. St. Philip's Settlement, op. cit., p. 203, p. 284.
3. Saltley Local History Project; tape transcript.

It is symptomatic of this that Birmingham, a bastion of working-class Conservatism, boasted just 11 working-class Unionist councillors and aldermen during our period of study (of whom five were elected for normally Labour seats in the Conservative landslide of 1931). In Sheffield, the Citizens' Alliance and its successors could claim six working-class representatives. Alderman A.R. Jephcott, formerly a working engineer and active trades unionist and onetime president of Birmingham Trades Council (between 1887 and 1889), a Liberal Unionist councillor, and from 1918 to 1929 Conservative M.P. for Yardley, was a singular exception to the general rule which prescribed an essentially passive and subordinate role for the working-class supporters of Conservatism.

It would, though, be mistaken to view this as a failing for which the Party leaders alone were culpable; the evidence suggests that the Party's rank and file were resentful and suspicious of those few working-class activists who became prominent on the grounds that they were getting ideas 'above their station' or were, in some way, 'on the make'. These, of course, were precisely the charges which could not be levelled against the upper-class Conservative politicians whose own political work was usually portrayed as impelled by 'duty' and 'service' rather than any of the baser motives of self-interest and self-aggrandisement that have occasionally influenced our political actors. This mode of thinking extended to the base of the Party's structure; in 1922, for example, a correspondence between Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland and his agent concluded that Lady Steel-Maitland rather than a local activist should become chairman (sic) of the Washwood Heath Unionist Women's Association on the grounds that the latter was 'sufficiently near to the others in social standing that they might be jealous of her'.[1]

A third quality of the upper classes that did much to maintain the

---

1. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/95/3; Steel-Maitland to Gradwell, 3;2;1922

deferential respect with which they were received was the aura of glamour and sophistication which attached to their breeding, manners and life-style. Far from resenting the extravagance and occasional dissipation of their social betters, many in the working class took a vicarious pleasure in an excitement and way of life which contrasted sharply with their own drab existence. Away from the more puritanical strains of the respectable working class, there was a considerable empathy with those 'gentlemen' whose charm belied their easy virtue. The working man who liked his beer and enjoyed a good night-out could see himself writ large in the behaviour of some of those of more exalted status. Even when their personal lives were as pedestrian as those of most of their supporters, upper-class politicians were still expected to look and play the part. Though to modern eyes, Austen Chamberlain, with his impeccable but old-fashioned dress, his monocle and button-hole, might appear a rather ridiculous imitation of his famous father, to many contemporaries he was a 'proper toff' - a term of approbation not abuse - and they enjoyed his studied flamboyance and personal charm. In comparison, his brother Neville appeared a pallid and humourless figure, dour and middle-class. Austen himself recognised the problem as he confided in a letter to their sister:[1]

> The future of Birmingham gives me great anxiety and Neville's position in particular... Boiled down, it all comes to this, N's *[sic]* manner freezes people. His workers think that he does not appreciate what they do for him. Everybody respects him and he makes no friends.

It is, perhaps, not surprising that when the time came to select a successor to Neville, Ladywood's Unionists sought a very different personality to replace him. Neville himself listed their criteria in a sardonic letter to Conservative Central Office:[2]

> The idea of the Selection Committee is a young man of talent, energy, and determination. He should be rich, handsome and accomplished; an

---

1. Austen Chamberlain Papers, AC5/1/339; Austen to Ida Chamberlain, 8;11;1924. See also: D. Dilks, Neville Chamberlain. Vol. 1, Pioneering and Reform, 1869-1929 (1984), p. 397.
2. Neville Chamberlain Papers, NC5/10/68; Neville Chamberlain to Sir Herbert Blain, 24;7;1926.

> eloquent speaker, a man of the world, and, not least, should be accompanied by a wife who combines perfect charm of manner with good looks and inexhaustible physical strength. No doubt you will have a number upon your list who will combine these various qualifications; and, if you would look out a few of the best of them, I should be very grateful.

In the end, the Ladywood party settled for Geoffrey Lloyd who was unmarried and not overly wealthy. He was, on the other hand, tall and handsome and a product of Harrow and Cambridge so he possessed at least some superficial attractiveness.

But deference was a two-sided phenomenon and its ideological alter ego was reciprocity. As Howard Newby has argued, deference is best understood as a 'form of social interaction', the dynamic aspect and ideological reflection of the prevailing status system rather than its source.[1] Where traditional authority was not superseded by a purely legalistic or meritocratic system, its functioning was lubricated and validated by the operation of a system of mutual duties and obligations. The role and status of the rich and powerful was legitimated by the services they performed for the poor and weak. In short, the deferential working class expected some return. What made their deference subordinating and, in many eyes, naive was not that they made no demands on their social superiors but that the exchange in which they participated was unequal.

One of the chief ways in which the upper classes made at least partial atonement for their good fortune was charity. As Newby again has argued, the gift was a peculiarly powerful buttress of the traditional social hierarchy because, while acting as a material symbol of the wealthy's honoured obligations, it enhanced the status of the donors and could be used discriminatingly in favour of the 'deserving' poor - a quality more often judged by their good behaviour and proper gratitude than by any

---

1. H. Newby, 'The Deferential Dialectic', Comparative Studies in Society and History, 17, (1975), pp. 141-46.

objective standard of penury.[1]

Wh have referred already to the charitable works of Smedley Crooke, the M.P. for Deritend, and Neville Chamberlain's wife, Annie.[2] Such activity was, perhaps, the clearest illustration of the gift relationship in action, but Unionism as a whole worked hard to secure its local status and support through charitable involvement. The Birmingham Mail organised one of the largest local relief funds and was a major provider of new boots and distinctive yellow jumpers to the city's slum children.[3] The Corporation also established a philanthropic role for itself through its support of various Lord Mayor's Funds for boots and clothing, and through the ad hoc appeals it gave its name to in cases of special need. These were, of course, non-political but it would be naive to suppose that no capital was ever made out of the political complexion of the Mail and City Council. Labour allegations about the improper use of charitable funds were certainly not uncommon, as when it was reported to the Trades Council that a 'prominent Tory' had been distributing meal tickets from the Mail fund with the comment, 'there you are. The Labour Party wouldn't do as much for you'.[4] Unionist leaders too clearly believed that their Party's involvement with such ventures could bring dividends and stated quite explicitly in 1924 that:[5]

> Arrangements should be made so that prominent Unionists...secure appointment on all local Committees for the administration of the Lord Mayor's Unemployment Fund, the Birmingham Mail fund, and other similar funds and charities.

The way in which the credit accrued in charitable work was cashed in on a personal basis at election time was well illustrated by the contest in St.

---

1. Newby, op. cit., p. 161.
2. See above, pp. 116-17. Dilks, op. cit., p. 272 provides additional examples of the charitable involvement of Neville and Annie Chamberlain.
3. K. Dayus, Her People (1982).
4. T.C., 13;1;1922.
5. BUA minutes, 12;12;1924.

Martin's and Deritend in 1922. The manifesto fo the sitting Unionist councillor, Alfred Chovil, was a bland restatement of the need for economy in national and local government which would have held little attraction for working-class voters. But Chovil supplemented this with two leaflets: one, from the Adult School of which he was leader, telling of his years of devoted service, his help to soldiers during the War, and his organisation of sports clubs and outings; the other, stating that he was the buying chairman of the Lord Mayor's Boot and Clothing Fund. The latter concluded rhetorically, 'Are you so foolish and ungrateful as to desert him for a stranger?'.[1] The answer, in this instance, was that the electors were, for Chovil's Labour opponent, the so-called stranger, was Jesse Williams who had become chairman of the ward committee of the Lord Mayor's Unemployment Relief Fund in the previous year. Labour infiltration into the field of organised charity, previously the prerogative of the well-heeled, became a source of some concern to local Unionists who believed that it was sapping their traditional support.[2]

Nevertheless, Labour activists could not really hope to compete with the resources and local celebrity of the more prominent Unionist representatives. The Town Crier's attacks on Alderman Talbot, a slum landlord and fierce opponent of Labour influence on the Housing Committee of the Council, aroused one Henry Barnes to write in his defence. It is worth quoting Barnes: firstly, as a rare unmediated expression of authentic working-class Conservatism; secondly, for the evidence his letter gives of the influence of old-fashioned religious values on at least some of the working-class Conservatives. Barnes wrote (in a style which the Town Crier pointedly omitted to correct):[3]

---

1. Birmingham Municipal Election Literature, BCL; St. Martin's, 1922.
2. Neville Chamberlain Papers, NC5/10/23; P.J. Hannon to Neville Chamberlain, 1;12;1924.
3. T.C., 30;12;1921.

> I could give you a real side of Mr. and Mrs. Talbot's personal work for All Saints Ward, and both their real brotherly and sisterly sympathy, and so very often personal help done, on behalf of the many, more so the poorer brethren...and though they possess and are keepers of more than I shall ever possess, in noways am I at all jealous, or more so envious, for they both lovingly know, being Stewards of their own, which is the right and proper ways so to do.

Clearly, Talbot's involvement in the ward's religious life and conscientous social work had won him respect in the locality and it is noteworthy that, when Austen Chamberlain sought ways to arrest Labour's seemingly inexorable advance in 1929, one of his suggestions was that churches and chapels in the well-to-do districts should establish links with their sister foundations in the poorer areas. Chamberlain argued that such activity would have formed:[1]

> a natural nucleus around which social workers could gather for such charitable work as is done by the Citizens' Committee, for visiting, and for movements like the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides...it would not be difficult to find among these social workers a sufficient number who were interested in politics and would take on the political education of a population whom they already knew and to whom they were already known.

The Ladywood Ward Women's Unionist Association had already implemented a similar scheme when it agreed, in 1919, to undertake some welfare work with the help of sympathetic local health visitors.[2] Ladywood and the Deritend Unionist Association were also among the local parties actively countering Labour's efforts in the same field by their organisation of children's parties and donations to the needy.[3]

There is also a suggestion that the Unionists were keen to harness the status and prestige of doctors for their own political ends. Harrison Barrow, who had been opposed for two years running by doctors standing under Unionist auspices, was certainly of this opinion and claimed there was 'a deliberate attempt on the part of the Unionist Party to utilise the

---

1. BUA Letters relating to West Birmingham Constituency; Austen Chamberlain to E.R. Canning, 20;6;1929.
2. Ladywood Ward Women's Unionist Association minutes, 11;4;1919.
3. ibid., 29;9;1924; BUA minutes, 12;3;1926.

medical profession to defeat the Labour candidate'.[1] Perhaps this was a little paranoid but there is no doubt that Conservative thinking saw nothing wrong in buttressing the Party's appeal by local influence; indeed, it was believed part of its vocation to establish just such personal ties of respect and affection between the different ranks of the social hierarchy in order to give the lie to socialist rhetoric of class war and prejudice.

Conservatives genuinely believed that it was the Labour Party and its revolutionary allies who were responsible for fomenting social unrest and class consciousness, and they worked hard to counter the baneful effects of left-wing propaganda. Charity was one such means but an immense amount of Conservative influence was secured by methods that were deliberately and necessarily informal and unorganised. For an intimate insight into this world of patronage and treating, we are indebted to the survival of the complete collection of Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland's correspondence with his Erdington constituents and local agents.

The letters reveal that, so far as his constituents were concerned, one significant aspect of a Tory M.P.'s job was that he should be a generous benefactor of local organisations and activities. A wide range of clubs and societies sought financial donations to boost their building funds, subsidise their socials and provide prizes, and there were many requests that the M.P. should attend the opening of a flower show or pet show or visit some gala evening of celebration. In Erdington, there were so large a number of such requests that many had to be turned down but Steel-Maitland was careful to avoid antagonism and offence and constantly sought the advice of his agent about which ventures were (in political terms)

---

1. T.C., 22;10;1926.

most worthy of support. He was, thus, persuaded to purchase 18 medals and a shield for the Nechells Tug of War team but could be inveigled to donate just one guinea to the Nechells Angling Club which, he was assured by his agent, had only a small membership.[1] Similar examples could be multiplied many times.

Steel-Maitland also worked more specifically to secure the loyalties of his working-class followers through treating. In 1923, the inaugural meeting of the Ward End branch of the Men's Unionist Association took place (characteristically) in a local pub. 45 attended and a round of drinks for everyone present was bought in Sir Arthur's name by his agent.[2] On another occasion, the Washwood Heath Unionist Association organised a smoking concert in the Cross Guns Hotel, and the agent's description of the event provides a fine example of the way in which treating was used by both sides for their mutual advantage. As he explained, the organisers:[3]

> thought it would be a good thing in order to bring your name before them, and in a good light, to stand all present a drink, which I did. This was accepted in a most hearty spirit, and when we mentioned your name and apologised for your non-attendance through accident, all the members present immediately arose and joined in singing "For he's a jolly good fellow". However, the cost of refreshments was £1-5-0...I hope you will not mind refunding me this. I think it will repay itself.

Such individual outgoings, small in themselves, mounted up and Steel-Maitland was careful to urge discretion in such dealings. But expectations raised could not be disappointed save at the risk of losing considerable rank and file support. In 1928, the Erdington Divisional Unionist Association organised a train trip to London culminating in a guided tour of the Palace of Westminster. Steel-Maitland put out discreet feelers as to whether it was anticipated that he would pay for the cost of refreshments

---

1. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/89/2; Steel-Maitland to Gradwell, 2;11;1923; Gradwell to Steel-Maitland, 15;9;1923.
2. ibid., GD193/95/2; Gradwell to Steel-Maitland, 26;2;1923.
3. ibid., GD193/277; Gradwell to Steel-Maitland, 13;11;1923.

and, to his chagrin, received the reply that a lot of people, especially in Washwood Heath (the most working-class ward of his constituency), would feel distinctly disgruntled if he did not.[1] In the event, Steel-Maitland had to pay for 604 teas at the Westminster Lyon's tea house.[2] Treating could prove dear, even to one of Steel-Maitland' personal fortune.

To those of lesser means, it was an even greater trial. One of the most active working-class Unionists in Washwood Heath was Bert Ollis, and his letter to Steel-Maitland gives an excellent picture of the bonhomie and good cheer that was counted on to oil the sinews of the Unionist machine:[3]

> In spite of defeat, our organisation has to be carried on and our efforts increased, if we are to win, social events will have to be maintained...
> At these functions, they often turn out expensive. The glass of ale still holds good for many here, and although I have done so several times to those whom I knew expected it, I could not afford it, but I would not allow them a lever against the party.
> Again, I have arranged to go round visiting districts with the chairman and secretary of the following district, down goes your hand again, they expect it.
> In short, Sir Arthur, and I speak quite financially and candidly, as acting chairman...it is a costly job.

To overcome some of the problems that Ollis faced, Steel-Maitland confidentially mooted the idea of a £5 annual retainer to cover his out-of-pocket expenses but the suggestion was discountenanced by his agent on the grounds that others would jump on the bandwagon in the expectation of similar treatment.[4]

The third aspect of the deferential relationship's reciprocality lay in personal contact. Deference was not founded on continuous face-to-face contact but those who presumed to lead were held to have a certain duty to socialise and make themselves known to their lower-class supporters.

---

1. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/209; Beardmore to Steel-Maitland, 15;9;1928.
2. ibid., GD193/209; Beardmore to Steel-Maitland, 18;9;1928; 2;10;1928.
3. ibid., GD193/95/1; B. Ollis to Steel-Maitland, 24;11;1921.
4. ibid., GD193/208; Steel-Maitland to Gradwell, 20;12;1921; Gradwell to Steel-Maitland, 22;12;1921.

If they failed in this minimal requirement, it became all too easy for the working-class rank and file of the Unionist Party to feel themselves 'used' and sense that their efforts were not being properly appreciated. Steel-Maitland's agent explained the political lethargy of the Erdington Conservative Club by their complaint 'that their councillors in the ward and their notables never bother to come and make themselves pleasant unless they have an axe to grind'.[1] The Club levelled the same charge against their M.P. who, it was said, only put in an appearance at election time.[2]

The ordinary constituents of Birmingham's Unionist politicians also expected that their M.P.s would at least visit the locality and be seen. When these expectations went unfulfilled, as was increasingly the case when local politicians achieved prominence in national government, their long absences became a source of considerable dissatisfaction amongst the electorate. Neville Chamberlain hardly had a winning personality in any case but his wife worked hard to compensate for his inadequacies. An election leaflet, put out in her name in 1924, shows how assiduously the Unionists sought to personalise their appeal, emphasising, in this instance, the 'good-neighbourly' rather than patronal side of the inter-class relationship. In her address to the women electors, Annie Chamberlain claimed to:[3]

> have often thought how lucky it is that we live so close that I can come into any part of the Division on my bicycle in a few minutes, and in this way I have got to know some thousands of you and every year I increase the number of my friends...
> I am not going to talk politics to you in this letter, but I want you to realise that I am just a woman like yourselves, with children of my own to bring up, and that I can sympathise with you in the hard struggles that many of you have.

---

1. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/117/3; Dallas to Steel-Maitland, 7;9;1925.
2. ibid., GD193/95/2; Gradwell to Steel-Maitland, 10;3;1923.
3. Neville Chamberlain Papers, NC5/12/28; Election leaflet, October, 1924.

Perhaps not all were convinced by the apparent concern and fellow-feeling evinced in this letter and Annie's social work, but to Ladywood's working-class Conservatives such sentiments must have been gratifying evidence of the close interest their upper-class leaders took in the lives of their ordinary supporters.

Once Neville's departure for Edgbaston was announced, his successor, Geoffrey Lloyd, made strenuous efforts to establish his own following. One of the major points in his favour was that he had time to give to nursing the constituency and in 1928, it was stated, he made over 1500 personal calls, each followed by a personal letter and propaganda.[1] His commitment was not enough to prevent Labour winning the seat in 1929 but the small margin of victory - just 11 votes - undoubtedly owed something to the individual support he had built up.

In the neighbouring constituency of West Birmingham, the name and character of Austen Chamberlain were still just enough to retain the seat for Unionism though Austen was harried by a Labour opponent who was a full-time propagandist in the Division. The chairman of the West Birmingham Unionist Association bemoaned the difficulties in counteracting:[2]

> the work of a man for four years, visiting courts and spreading the rumour that all visits to Geneva were holidays, and if re-elected our member would be off the week after for another holiday.

But he went on to state that there was:[3]

> still a great tradition running through the Division. The presence of Sir Austen and Lady Chamberlain in any street acted like magic. The work of Lady Chamberlain in her court meetings was very successful. As one capable worker reported "Lady Chamberlain left delightful impressions and I hear of waverers voting through her cottage visits".

The glamour and graciousness of such visitations were still enough to turn

---

1. BUA minutes, 16;11;1928.
2. BUA Letters relating to West Birmingham Constituency; E.R. Canning to Austen Chamberlain, 21;6;1929, 'West Birmingham Election. Chairman's Report'.
3. ibid.

a few working-class heads and convince some of the essential beneficence and magnaminity of their upper-class rulers, and their success was such as to persuade Austen Chamberlain to abandon conventional political meetings in 1931 in order to concentrate on house-to-house canvassing.[1]

We have dwelt at some length on the role of deference within working-class Conservatism as the sentiment has rightly been judged to play a major part in the explanation of the Tory sympathies of many working people. But whereas the questionnaires and opinion polling have simply treated deference as something attitudinal and, by extension, basically irrational, the historical record shows it to have been a structural phenomenon contingent upon certain modes of behaviour and a particular balance of social forces. Deference was by no means a merely material calculation of mutual interests but it was an exchange in which both parties participated with a consciousness of duties and obligations and an expectation of at least partial reciprocity. For those with the advantages of education and a more meritocratic ordering of the social hierarchy, it remains a grotesquely ill-balanced exchange, scarcely rational if judged by any purely pecuniary standard or liberal notion of social justice. But to the poorest and least-educated sections of the population, ideas of equality were pipe-dreams; they were concerned simply to survive the inhospitable conditions in which they found themselves and to take, as a bonus, such compensating pleasures as contemporary society allowed. In this light, deference may be viewed as a strategy to get by in, and make the most of, a situation in which few saw any hope or possibility of change. It was not, in any sense, an articulated or coherent strategy but it was one which, to those with the least power and resources, must have seemed

---

1. Austen Chamberlain Papers, AC5/1/561; Austen to Ida Chamberlain, 24;10;1931.

more viable and more available than many others.

The deferential interaction also formed and encouraged a traditional and almost feudalistic view of the world in which the hierarchical ordering of society was accepted as God-given, sanctified by usage and legitimated by practice. Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland expressed exactly the Conservative worldview which, in more inchoate form, was shared by his working-class followers:[1]

> The Socialist Party is the really class Party. It represents one class only, with a sprinkling of the intelligentsia "on the make". The Unionist Party represents all classes. It looks upon the country as an organic whole. As in every organic whole, the parts differ and the rewards will also differ, but it is the duty of the Unionist Party to see the treatment is fair while it has regard to economic laws, the disregard of which will bring the whole country to disaster. But if this is the right view, it follows also that there should be friendliness and intercourse between members of different classes just as there was on the battlefield and just as there is in many a village cricket field today.

Steel-Maitland's idyll hardly seems capable of application to the habitat of the industrial working class but it was the success of Unionism in Birmingham to have built up strong personal links between its politicians and constituents and to have fostered a distinct local pride. These provided a context where the traditional organicist ideals of Conservative philosophy could maintain their influence and, for so long, override the antagonisms of class that the form of local society might otherwise have been expected to engender. It is, indeed, suggestive that, when one Labour propagandist sought to describe the mentality of the average Birmingham worker in the 1920s, she chose to compare it to that of the village labourer twenty years earlier.[2] Labour, in general, could only view such attitudes with a mixture of incredulity and contempt. An article in the Town Crier was exaggerated and unsympathetic but it did portray convincingly something of the life-style of those working-class Conservatives whom it

---

1. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/209; 'Memorandum on Reorganisation of the Erdington Division', August, 1929.
2. Margery Newboult in T.C., 17;7;1925.

described graphically as the 'Snobs of the Abyss':[1]

> poor wretches who eagerly swallow the flatteries of their "betters" on all occasions, who preen their ill-clad backs when Messrs. Chamberlain and Co. tell them that beneath their deceptive exterior lies the "backbone of the Empire". They are steeped in a pathetically weak solution of local respectability and would vote a china dog or brass fire-iron into Parliament if they thought it was the proper thing to do.

The reality was more nuanced but the writer correctly emphasised the 'local respectability' of the slum-dwellers for it was precisely this quality which gave meaning and consolation to an otherwise fairly squalid existence. Labour attacks on the habits and conditions of lower working-class life, when they were perceived as denigrating or undermining even this ideological compensation, were antagonising and counter-productive; the pat on the back, however patronising it might seem to outsiders, was valued.

However, to characterise popular Conservatism as merely a reflex of the lower working-class life-style would be mistaken. There were many others in the working class who believed quite honestly and intelligently that Conservative policies were the most just and practicable possible in the present state of society. Like probably the majority of their Labour-voting compatriots, these working-class Conservatives made no heavy demands on the system in which they lived; they wanted fair pay and treatment and some sensible reform. What differentiated them, perhaps, was a more fatalistic acceptance of the basic immutability of the current order and a patriotism in which class interests were thought to be in antagonism to a supraordinate national interest which found its principal representative in the Conservative Party.

Unfortunately, in an historical survey, without access to membership lists, opinion polling and the like, it is simply not possible to go much

---

1. T.C., 29;5;1925.

beyond this. There is some evidence, judged from the few biographical details we have of the most prominent working-class Conservative activists, that this type of Conservative support came disproportionately from the clerical and supervisory strata of the workforce and, insofar as this was the case, it ties in with latter-day research which has shown heavier Tory voting among those with middle-class connections and contacts.[1] But the deleterious influence of bourgeois associations cannot be held wholly to blame. It does seem from the evidence, or lack of it, that Conservative voting was as much a matter of individual choice as of socio-economic structuration; indeed, to believe otherwise would lead to the arrogant assumption that ordinary working people were incapable of forming their own judgment and taking their own decisions. Many people voted Conservative simply because they considered, rightly or wrongly, that the Conservative Party was the most likely to achieve economic prosperity for the country and individual and social stability for the nation as a whole.

On the other hand, while a lot of Conservative support has derived from essentially pragmatic verdicts, the Conservative Party has always been able to tip the balance in its favour by its consistent claim to be the only true guardian of the national interest. A large part of Conservatism's appeal has rested on its devotion to the Flag and Empire, and history has shown many times that patriotism is the most easily aroused and mobilised of popular emotions. When the crunch came, the workers of Birmingham and Sheffield, as did those elsewhere, put the interests of their country before the interests of their class, and there is no doubt that one of the strongest, if least tangible, aspects of the Conservative Party's

---

1. McKenzie and Silver, op. cit., p. 92;
K. Roberts et al., The Fragmentary Class Structure (1977), p. 56;
W.G. Runciman, Relative Deprivation and Social Justice (1972), pp. 175-76.

attractiveness lay in the vague sense that it stood for the country in a way that no other party did or could.

This was certainly the message persistently trumpeted in the Party's propaganda which constantly vilified the personal and political integrity of its opponents and their patriotism. When it came to election time, the gentlemen of England fought with their gloves off in a manner which can only be adjudged unscrupulous and underhand. We have referred already to the use of the Zinoviev letter, the Russian treaties and other such electoral 'stunts'. Beneath these periodic scare-stories, there was a more persistent undercurrent of propaganda which linked Labour with atheism, industrial conscription and even the 'nationalisation of women'.[1] All the worst sins of Soviet Russia, real or imagined, were attached to the Labour Party in a crude campaign of guilt by association. Building from a nucleus of truth and the genuine sympathy that existed for the Russian Revolution in the British Labour movement, the Conservatives systematically painted the Labour Party in a lurid and extremist light which appears fantastic when set against the stolid temperament and deep respectability of the vast majority of its supporters. The significance of this lay not so much in the fact that many in the working class swallowed wholesale the lies and half-truths which were fed to them, but in the way that they contributed to a climate of opinion in which Labour was perceived as a disruptive and anti-national threat to the established political order.

To some Conservatives, perhaps, all this was merely cynical vote-catching but it did represent, more deeply, a genuine belief that the Conservative Party was the only safe and sane choice of government and that the alternatives were both impractical and dangerous. A Unionist leaflet

---

1. Birmingham Parliamentary Election Literature; 'Fighting Notes Against Liberals and Socialists', Ladywood, 1923; T.C., 11;11;1927.

issued in West Birmingham in 1924, on 'The Ethics of Canvassing', brings out this mode of thought very well:[1]

> Have a bold talk. Show them we are not "down-hearted", we have a policy which is absolutely essential to the Trade and Prosperity of the Country. Point out that the Political Labour Party - a mixture of Socialism and Communism - will be a national disaster. Remember it is absolutely impossible for any reasonable man or woman to be a Socialist or Communist - and if he or she is unbiassed, they cannot logically vote for Labour.

Partly, such certainty reflected the self-belief and assurance necessary to bolster and motivate the political work of any activist but, more profoundly, it symbolised the deep confidence of the Conservative Party in its self-appointed and proclaimed role as the unique custodian of British customs and institutions. While Labour was the party of movement, Conservatism represented the party of order; as such, it was attractive to many in the working class whose political philosophy was fairly summed up in the old adage, 'Better the devil you know...'. Though Marxists correctly believed that economic and technological developments impelled change, they failed to take into account the fact that popular sentiments have stood most often for inertia.

---

1. Birmingham Parliamentary Election Literature, BCL; West Birmingham, 1924.

11.3 Organisation and Activism

In turning now to look at the nature of the Conservative Party's political work, it is not surprising to find that the Party's organisation exhibited a strong hierarchy and distinct division of labour based on a clear view of the proper roles and duties of the different social classes. Positions of leadership and authority were occupied almost exclusively by those of breeding and status. Even in Birmingham, despite its mass popular membership and an organisation described by Neville Chamberlain as 'thoroughly democratic', it was pointed out in 1929 that not one member of the Birmingham Unionist Association's Management Committee belonged to the working classes.[1] To be fair, it was as a consequence agreed to co-opt one, and later, three working-class representatives.[2] But such moves were essentially tokenistic; power resided with those accustomed by upbringing and experience to such responsibility, and few working-class Conservatives would have thought to question such arrangements.

The same principle was extended to the divisional level where the tendency was for the president of the local association to be either the sitting M.P. or the most prestigious local worthy, preferably one with a title. These possibilities were denied the Brightside Conservative Association but it was characteristic that the president of the party was Douglas Vickers and that three of its ten vice-presidents were members of the Firth family - all, of course, leading industrialists in the area.[3] To some extent, such positions were honorary and ornamental, though certain duties - principally of a financial and social nature - were extracted. Lower down the Party, it was expected that the notables would earn their salt. It is suggestive of this that seven of the ten officers elected at

---

1. BUA minutes, 19;9;1924; 12;7;1929.
2. ibid., 12;7;1929; 11;10;1929.
3. Brightside Conservative Association minutes, 22;7;1918.

the founding meeting of the Ladywood Ward Women's Association came from neighbouring Edgbaston and, though many of these were superseded as the branch got off the ground, it remained the case that the leadership of the branch remained firmly in middle- and upper-class hands.[1] In a similar way, in Deritend 25 businessmen were delegated to take charge of the Division's polling districts.[2]

It is interesting to note that when the Party's 'natural' leadership failed to fulfil its expected tasks, the deference that might have been anticipated from the grass roots rapidly evaporated. In Ladywood in 1924, E.J. Denton (a railway clerk and one of the few working-class Unionist councillors) felt compelled to complain:[3]

> that many of our leaders did not take part in the ordinary propaganda work of the Association, and were only on view at Annual Meetings and at Elections; some only at Parliamentary elections. They must take their share along with the rank and file, and take an interest in their work.

Five years later, after the disappointment of the 1929 General Election, the Unionists of All Saint's went even further when they forwarded the following resolution to the Birmingham Unionist Association:[4]

> We, the All Saint's Ward Executive Committee (comprising working men and women) deplore the apathy shown by the business men of industrial wards towards the workings of the Unionist Party and trust that the Management Committee will endeavour to educate the business men and men of leisure to take a more active part in the activities of the Party.

Such rumblings of discontent were, admittedly, hardly typical but they are further evidence that deference expected some return.

Beneath this higher stratum of leadership, there was an important second rank of upper working-class activists who acted as the non-commissioned

---

1. Ladywood Ward Women's Unionist Association minutes, 28;2;1919; 23;2;1921; 6;9;1923.
2. BUA minutes, 14;10;1927.
3. Ladywood Division Unionist Association minutes, 23;1;1924.
4. BUA minutes, 11;10;1929.

officers of the Tory high command. Of the ten working-class Unionist councillors in Birmingham in our period, four held white-collar positions and two were foremen; of Sheffield's six working-class Citizens' councillors, two were in clerical jobs and one was a foreman. If the evidence of Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland's correspondence in Erdington is more widely applicable, such working-class leaders appear to have played an important role in the Conservative Party's smooth running, acting both as intelligence agents for the upper-class leadership whose social status prevented them gaining a true comprehension of rank and file feelings, and as transmitters to the Party faithful of the leadership's current preoccupations. Though accorded little formal recognition in the Party organisation, there is no doubt that the work of such men and women was deeply valued by those Conservative politicians who wished to achieve a genuine understanding of popular sentiments.[1]

The records also suggest that the Conservatives' active membership (as opposed to the majority who merely subscribed to, or voted for, the Party) tended to come from the upper strata of the working class too. Even in the solidly industrial constituencies, a definite social hierarchy existed and the evidence from Birmingham is that working-class Unionists sometimes felt uneasy in canvassing the poorer districts of their own locality. The chairman of the West Birmingham association went so far as to threaten to get outside help from the 'comfortable suburbs' when the branch's own workers were unwilling to 'tackle the bad streets'.[2] Such findings do not contradict the evidence of lower working-class Conservatism but they do reinforce the general impression that working-class activists of all persuasions tended to come disproportionately from the respectable and better educated sections of their class.

---

1. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/89/3, GD193/286; Steel-Maitland to H.C. Young, 25;1;1924, Steel-Maitland to Sir William Morris, 28;1;1929.
2. BUA Letters relating to West Birmingham Constituency; E.R. Canning to Austen Chamberlain, 21;6;1929, 'West Birmingham Election, 1929. Chairman's Report'.

It was women who formed the backbone of Conservative organisation; in Birmingham, for example, they formed the majority of the membership in every division but one - King's Norton being the solitary exception.[1] Nor was this preeminence merely numerical; the Conservative Party's female membership also seems to have undertaken the bulk of its conventional political activity. This was particularly the case at election time when, in both Birmingham and Sheffield, most of the tedious but important work of addressing envelopes, folding leaflets, delivery and canvassing was done by women.[2] At first glance, given the generally subordinate status of women in the political arena, this seems surprising but it clearly reflects to a large degree the traditional discriminatory assumption that routine, clerical and non-skilled work was best performed by females. It was certainly the case that those in supervisory roles, Conservative agents and officers, were predominantly male. It also reflects a situation in which women members had, by and large, more free time and greater flexibility than their male counterparts who were more often in full-time employment.

On the other hand, the phenomenon of female political activism should not be dismissed as merely superficial. There is plentiful survey evidence to suggest that women tend to be more heavily committed to the Conservative cause than men, and the contemporary records of the 1920s indicate that, then too, women were perennially the most active section of the Conservative membership.[3] The disparity in male and female political activism was unusually well illustrated in the Handsworth Division of Birmingham where it was reported in 1926 that the three women's branches met at a set time every fortnight while the numerically smaller men's membership had no

---

1. BUA minutes, 14;1;1927.
2. ibid., 13;4;1923; 6;9;1929; 10;12;1931;
   Sheffield Conservative Women's Advisory Committee minutes, 9;5;1932.
3. McKenzie and Silver, op. cit., p. 86;
   Runciman, op. cit., p. 175.

regular meetings.[1] In Handsworth, in a complete reversal of the normal sex roles, it was the women who established a new men's branch of the Unionist Association.[2] More generally, and more typically, women also played a major part in the setting-up of the Conservatives' Junior Sections and branches of the Young Britons' League.[3]

The outlook of the male working-class Conservative was frequently rooted in a culture which was non-political, even in many cases anti-political, in nature. Their Conservatism derived from their patriotism and their unquestioning acceptance of the 'natural' social order; their distinctly Tory sympathies were fostered by the beery conviviality and ethic of good cheer by which the Party spread its appeal among the poorer classes. While the women were given recitals in local school halls, the men were entertained with smoking concerts in pubs, and it was the normal practice of the Men's Unionist Associations to hold their meetings on licensed premises.[4] The old connection between the drink interest and the Conservative Party lived on into the 1920s and, in 1924, a Unionist Subcommittee on Organisation quite candidly recommended 'as close a friendship as possible between the Divisional Associations and the Licensed Victuallers' on the grounds that:[5]

> Every licensed victualler can become, with a little helpful encouragement, a discreet but successful propagandist for the Unionist Party.

This had certainly been the case in the previous year when one well-known local brewery had circularised its pubs with anti-Labour literature.[6]

---

1. BUA minutes, 10;12;1926.
2. ibid., 1;4;1927.
3. Erdington Division Women's Unionist Branch Committee minutes, 11;10;1923; Ladywood Division Unionist Association minutes, 23;1;1924; Park Division Women's Unionist Council minutes, 7;4;1932.
4. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/209; R. Edwards to Steel-Maitland, 11;3;1929; BUA minutes, 16;4;1926; 10;9;1926.
5. BUA minutes, 12;12;1924.
6. T.C., 9;11;1923.

The structural manifestation of this tendency in working-class Conservatism was found in the Unionist Workingmen's Clubs, of which there were 14 in Birmingham. For those who looked to the Clubs to provide evidence of enthusiastic Conservatism and a core of political activists, they were undeniably a disappointment. In 1928, the Unionist Chief Agent reported that the Clubs' political work was 'practically negligible', and it took considerable effort to persuade just seven of the Clubs to accept Party speakers in the run-up to the 1929 General Election.[1] The experience of Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland, who spent £1500 on providing a Unionist Workingmen's Club in Nechells, was salutary. He wrote in reply to an enquiry on the venture's feasibility from Sir Evelyn Cecil, the M.P. for Aston:[2]

> I have been very disappointed in the result. There are one or two good fellows at the Club but for the most part it is a social centre, and instead of being more keen on politics than before I think that the men are less so.

By 1929, he was certain that 'no new Clubs should be created of the type with which we are familiar'; if premises were made available, he was adamant that 'no alcoholic drinks and no billiards' be allowed to add to their attractiveness.[3]

Clearly, then, the Clubs failed to fulfil the politicians' hopes for their impact but, while they never became centres of political activism, they did, nevertheless, serve as an important social base of a type of working-class Conservatism which by its nature was politically passive and whose very attraction lay in its proclaimed lack of moral and political earnestness. A large part of the Conservative Party's appeal to the lower working class lay in its endorsement of their mores and life-style and its

---

1. BUA minutes, 14;12;1928; 15;3;1929.
2. Steel-Maitland Papers, GD193/11/1; Steel-Maitland to Sir Evelyn Cecil, ?/1/1925.
3. ibid., GD193/209; 'Memorandum on Reorganisation of the Erdington Division', August, 1929.

message that politics were best left for others to worry about.

The same implicit understanding informed many of the activities of the women's associations. Like their sisters in the other parties, Conservative women placed a heavy emphasis on achieving a healthy mix of social and political activities by which to recruit and maintain a large membership. The minutes of the Ladywood Ward Women's Unionist Association show that outings and parties played an important part in branch life and, in Moseley, the King's Heath branch arranged a fortnightly winter programme in which socials alternated with meetings of an educational character.[1]

In addition, in some areas a definite equivalent to the Unionist Workingmen's Clubs existed in the Women's Unionist Institutes; in 1924, there were six of these in the Ladywood Division alone.[2] But, in sharp contrast to the male preserves, the women's centres appear to have been highly active in the political field. The 'Women's Club' established in Ladywood in 1920 was adjudged an 'unqualified success in every way'; its 110 members distributed the Unionist organ Straight Forward, undertook canvasses every three months, and organised their own polling districts.[3] It was considered that:[4]

> if any move were made to separate the ward work and Club work, a weakening if not disaster would follow.

Some reasons for the greater political activism have been given already. What appears to have been the principal factor in the political effectiveness of the women's clubs - apart, that is, from their lack of alcohol - was the way in which the clubs encouraged an air of domesticity which found reflection in much of the Conservative Party's propaganda for women. The

---

1. Moseley Divisional Unionist Association, King's Heath Women's Branch Programmes, 1927-28, 1928-29, 1931-32.
2. Ladywood Division Unionist Association minutes, 23;1;1924.
3. Ladywood Ward Women's Unionist Association minutes, 23;2;1921.
4. ibid.

women's clubs promoted rational recreation with a distinct emphasis on the home and family; Conservatism proclaimed itself the chief defender of the sanctity of marriage and the religious values which upheld family life. Whereas male working-class culture tended to divorce the Conservative Party's male membership from active political participation, female Conservatives were encouraged to see a close connection between their social and domestic lives and the Party's political work. The effectiveness of the liaison thus constructed was illustrated by the practical devotion of Conservative women to the Party's cause come election time.

We will conclude this chapter by a brief examination of the Conservatives' organisation of youth. Like all political parties, the Conservatives placed considerable importance in the recruitment of the young but more than most, and in keeping with the general tone of Conservative philosophy, they were anxious not to 'bore them with politics'.[1] In general, there was little danger of this for the Party's junior sections advertised a balanced and wide-ranging programme of activities, instructional meetings predominating in the winter and recreational occasions in the more hospitable conditions of summer.[2] Most junior branches met weekly or fortnightly and most arranged dances and socials with the same frequency. In Ladywood, for example, political lectures alternated with socials but even the lectures were followed by dancing and games.[3] The same mix of education and entertainment was found in the three junior branches of the King's Norton Unionist Association.[4]

Similarly, and like their counterparts in the Labour Party, the junior Unionists placed great store in organising their own sporting and

---

1. Ladywood Division Unionist Association minutes, 23;1;1924.
2. BUA minutes, 6;11;1925.
3. Neville Chamberlain Papers, NC5/10/96; Ladywood Division Junior Unionists' Programme, September-December, 1921.
4. BUA minutes, 16;7;1926.

recreational activities. Among their moresuccessful ventures was a Junior Football League with eight participating teams and a Swimming Club with a membership of 260.[1] Besides these city-wide associations, the juniors organised a whole range of cricket, rambling and cycling clubs and dramatic societies which were simply too numerous to be listed. Given that, in 1925, the 21 branches of the Unionist youth organisation had over 3000 members, there was undoubtedly considerable scope for such non-political diversions.[2] It may be taken as indicative of a far wider spread of social activity that in April, 1926 the juniors of Yardley were advertised as taking part in two dances, a whist drive, a bicycle outing, a jumble sale and their annual summer camp.[3]

The Young Britons, which catered for those aged 7 to 14, were less ambitious in recreational terms and less sophisticated in their politics. But the 'games, patriotic songs and short addresses on Empire' which it organised were similarly designed to drive home the universal message that a young Briton or an old one, if a true patriot, found his real home and safeguard in the Conservative and Unionist party.[4]

---

1. BUA Junior Council minutes, 23;3;1932.
2. BUA minutes, 6;11;1925.
3. Progress (Organ of Yardley Divisional Unionist Association), April, 1926.
4. BUA minutes, 16;7;1926.

11.4 Conclusion

In this section, we have discussed working-class Conservatism in terms of its ideological and behavioural characteristics. In conclusion, we should recall, as noted in previous chapters, that it was a phenomenon with a specific, located, existence in working-class life with certain structural supports and socio-economic conditions which promoted its occurrence and facilitated its operation. On the other hand, we wish to rescue working-class Conservatism from its actual or implied treatment as a species of political irrationalism; it represented, too, a choice and a strategy. Though we may question its realism and viability as a means of defending working-class interests, we should not dismiss the assessment it stood for but seek to understand it in its own terms.

Many observers and writers have viewed politics as a choice between fundamentally opposed ideologies and systems. This, however, is merely a reflection of their own standpoint as intellectuals who interpret the world and not infrequently wish to change it. It is also to accept the rhetoric and self-image of those active in politics at their own estimation. In fact, there is plentiful evidence to suggest that ordinary voters do not see the decision they make as one between basically antagonistic and counterposed alternatives; their choice is made upon an assessment of which of the main political parties seems most likely to manage the present order in a reasonably efficient and humane way. Both Conservative and Labour voters have accepted the fundamentals of the status quo. The mass of people have rarely demanded radical change; more often than not, their expectations were limited to hopes of decent treatment, modest prosperity and a little cautious reform.

The search for political objectivity is chimerical but, placing

preconceived notions and preferences to one side, it must be said that the Conservative Party has seemed at least as likely to fulfil these inexacting requirements in the 20th. century as its chief rivals. It is interesting to note that even in the work of Robert McKenzie, by no means a left-winger, there is an implicit but pervasive assumption that the working-class Conservative was an eccentric whose defiance of his 'natural' class loyalties demands special explanation. There is an intellectual arrogance and an anti-Conservative bias in this treatment for it is based on the presupposition that working people could not choose to vote Conservative for quite intelligible and rational reasons. In fact, many working-class people who did vote for the Right employed almost precisely the same criteria and modes of thought as their compatriots who opted for the alternatives of the Left.

This perspective also leads to a questioning of the distinction made by both McKenzie and Nordlinger between 'deferentials' who voted Conservative because of their belief in the natural fitness of the upper orders to govern, and 'seculars' and 'pragmatists' who voted Conservative because they thought the Party was the better economic manager.[1] It is clear that these two groups were, in reality, making the same type of assessment and drawing the same conclusion; both sets believed that the Conservative Party would rule the country with better results. The difference between them lay in the grounds on which they based their decision but, rather than dismissing the 'deferentials' as naive and irrational, we might on the contrary conclude that they were, in some ways, making an informed and quite sophisticated choice. Within the rules of the game as contemporarily applied (and few envisaged any essential alteration), the Conservatives, with their inherited and inculcated belief in their

---

1. McKenzie and Silver, op. cit., p. 164;
Nordlinger, op. cit., p. 64.

unique capacity to lead, and, more practically, their social and ideological connections with big business and the Civil Service, may well have been the better qualified to keep the ship of state on steady course. At any rate, even if this were proved not to be the case, the grounds for supposing it so were far from inconsequential.

Finally, in the context of the academic discussion of working-class Conservatism, we should point out that it has been firmly rooted in a particular temporal reality. For a number of years in the post-Second World War period, it did appear that Labour had become the normal and natural representative of the working class in government. Then, in strictly numerical terms, the working-class Conservative had become the eccentric and his or her political affiliations stood out more sharply in contrast to the prevailing tide of popular opinion. Subsequent elections, however, have caused us to re-define our perspectives as the working-class voting base of the Labour Party has been progressively eroded and as the Conservatives have become, again in strictly numerical terms, the majority party of the working class. Once Labour is no longer viewed as inevitably the major representative of working-class interests, the status and significance of the working-class Conservative can be considered more objectively.

The elements of working-class Conservatism were basically constant just as, until recently, the essential nature of Conservative philosophy was constant. Its supporters accepted the traditional and established social order, desired its stability and were patriotically proud of the national culture which it upheld. On the other hand, the weight and configuration of its elements were in flux. The structural supports of slum Conservatism were being eroded and local influence was in decline;

the more jingoistic effusions of national sentiment had become unfashionable. Toryism based on the local seigneur, an ale-house culture and military glory had to adapt to changed conditions, and new-style Conservatism had to make specific references and concessions to working-class interests. It had also to cope with a situation in which the Labour Party was increasingly winning for itself a position of trust and responsibility within the working-class community.

Essentially, though, the ideological bases of Conservatism remained constant for the Party stood fast by its claim to be the only real custodian of the British national interest. Labour's principal appeal to the working class - its class identity - also limited its attractiveness because most in the working class have assessed themselves more readily in terms of their role within a national culture than as the victims of a class system, still less as participants in a class struggle. The realities and identities formed and fostered by a sense of national belongingness have, with rare exceptions, been stronger than those enjoined by affiliations of class.[1] Working-class Conservatism has not been an aberration but part of the very mainstream of working-class politics.

---

1. F. Parkin, 'Working-Class Conservatives: a Theory of Political Deviance', British Journal of Sociology, 18, (1967).

CONCLUSION

We have now completed our survey of working-class politics in Birmingham and Sheffield and the time has come to draw some overall conclusions. In the first instance, it is necessary to refer once more to the strong contrast that existed between the politics of the two towns. No simple explanation underlies this contrast; a whole range of historical and contemporary, structural and human factors merged and interacted to shape the towns' working-class politics, and it would be quite erroneous to focus on one set of circumstances in neglect of the others.

In the first three chapters, we described some of the socio-economic factors which influenced Birmingham and Sheffield's political evolutions. The topographical and geological conditions which favoured Sheffield's growth as a centre of steel-founding and the geographical considerations which fostered Birmingham's development as a centre of commerce and industry were each, in turn, to affect the nature of the towns' working-class communities. Sheffield came to boast a concentrated, heavy industrial, manufacturing base while Birmingham developed to provide a diverse range of goods and services. The one led to a homogeneous, strongly proletarian, form of society; the other, to a highly differentiated and fragmented working population. Sheffield's social environment conduced to the growth of a life-style which fostered and strengthened specifically working-class mores and loyalties; that of Birmingham was, on the whole, less solidary and more open to outside and cross-class influences. By the 1920s, support for the Labour Party was becoming one aspect of the working-class community's self-identity and, as we now know, in 1926 Sheffield was the first major city to fall under Labour control. Birmingham, on the other hand, remained a bastion of working-class Conservatism.

Such an explanation trips readily from the pen but it does, of course, slide easily into a form of crude economic determinism. The reductio ad absurdum of this analysis would be that Sheffield became a Labour stronghold because it had reserves of iron ore and five fast-running rivers. To write the argument is sufficient to demonstrate its fatuity. Politics were made by man and their character was, in the final analysis, the responsibility of human agency.

In chapters 4 to 6, we examined some of the forms of political organisation and activity and some of the national events which shaped the character of politics in our two case-studies. The nature of both national and local government had a strong influence on popular political perceptions and affiliations; the parties' local organisation and propaganda played a significant role in mediating and refining the impact of the politicians' rule and reinforcing or countervailing their popular appeal.

Birmingham had a powerful heritage of radical middle-class leadership - personified, above all, in the figure of Joseph Chamberlain - which lived on into the interwar period. Middle-class politics in Birmingham was Unionist - a political philosophy which combined elements of Conservatism and Liberalism but which possessed, most importantly, its own uniquely local identity and pride. Unionism, through its ideological catholicity and through the abilities of its leading proponents, continued to speak to both the sectional interests of the Birmingham working class and its distinct civic patriotism. The Unionists' administration of the city was sanctioned and facilitated by the widespread popular support they possessed and still sought to encourage.

Sheffield's traditions were of independent and sometimes militant working-class action. The form of local industry and society and the city's strong trades unionism came together to form a powerful base for an

independent working-class politics. The local Labour movement was fortunate in possessing an indigenous leadership capable of fulfilling and consolidating this potential while Sheffield's right-wing politicians were distinguished by the reactionary nature of their rule and their failure, and lack of any apparent desire, to appease the interests of their working-class constituents. The middle-class politicians' blind refusal of the economic, social and political realities of Sheffield reaped its reward in 1926 with their eviction from office.

At the same time, in both Birmingham and Sheffield, circumstances and developments in national government were conspiring to thrust Labour's claim to be the only true defender of working-class interests to the forefront of political discourse. Local conditions in Sheffield, particularly its mass unemployment, fortified the trend of national dynamics while in Birmingham they tended to diminish their impact but, in both towns, the reality was of a Labour Party growing in size and status and consolidating practically its ideological claim on working-class loyalties.

Having fleshed out the skeletal outline of socio-economic conditions with some political history, we can see the crucial role played by Birmingham and Sheffield's political actors in shaping local affiliations. Nevertheless, it is clear that they were, to some extent, acting within the parameters laid down by the social and economic character of their localities. Socio-economic conditions provided the terrain of the politicians' struggle and the politicians' impact lay in their ability to utilise and mobilise those factors in the local environment favourable to their political aspirations whilst minimising the influence of those that were not. To mix the metaphor, the local economy and the forms of community to which it gave rise were the raw materials of the political process but its end-product

owed everything to the skill of the politicians and the parties they led in working and refining these elemental resources.

The 'Forward March of Labour' was not inevitable, and it was a far slower and more chequered process in Birmingham than in Sheffield. If, in the 1920s, Labour's progress had come to possess a certain air of inexorability, this owed more to the contemporary political climate than to the Party's inherent qualities. Economic conditions and legislative enactments gave class an unusual salience in the post-war years, and the failure of the middle-class parties to appease the working class lent credence and credibility to Labour's claim to be the only genuine defender of working-class interests. This failure on the part of middle-class politicians was not, of course, merely contingent; their class affiliations and ideological sympathies limited the specific appeal they could make to the lower-class electorate. But had economic circumstances been more propitious, had there been a politician with the charisma and populist appeal of Joseph Chamberlain, things might have been different. As it was, Labour's working-class credentials became a conspicuous advantage at a time when Conservatives and Liberals seemed unable and unwilling to satisfy the demands of their working-class supporters.

There were some differences, though none so marked as those of their political complexion, in the content of Birmingham and Sheffield's politics but what really stands out in the 1920s is the extent to which the ideas and activities of the main political organisations were the same in both towns. Local flavour remained and local initiative was imperative but the style and platform of the political parties were increasingly dictated by their national, and even international, leaderships. In the second half of the thesis, we abandoned the comparative perspective for it no longer seemed applicable.

Chapters 7 and 8 dealt with the Labour Party as we sought to give a comprehensive and empathetic description of the Party's principles and group life. Labour's ideology, reflecting the circumstances of the Party's formation, was an amalgam of different strands and influences which combined elements of high idealism and visionary hope with a short-sighted focus on immediate and limited reform. There have been critics enough to point out the inadequacies and failings of the Party's thinking and there were many contemporarily, and many more subsequently, who have been quick to condemn Labour for its betrayal of socialist ideals. Such criticism can come glibly from those whose own ideas and strategies have not been, nor are likely to be, put into action. Here, we have tried to assess Labour in its own terms, not in the belief that its principles were inviolable or its practice pristine, but on the assumption that it is meaningless to judge it by criteria which its own followers did not profess to endorse. Labour was flawed but it was the authentic representative of a working class springing from a distinct national culture and possessing its own unique qualities of practicality and sentimentalism, idealism and tolerance.

The Labour Party's subculture catered for the interests of its own membership. If it failed to fulfil some of the more radical hopes placed in it then and now, that is because it succeeded in its chosen field - the diversion and entertainment of the Party's supporters. Labour's group life ostensibly failed to subvert the status quo but it did make it more pleasant and enjoyable for those whose inclinations led them into Labour politics. This was a modest enough cultural achievement but it paralleled Labour's political project which the Party envisaged, in the short term at least, as the reform and amelioration of the prevailing system, not its overthrow.

Neither political Cooperation nor revolutionary politics made a larger impact but each played an important role in the life of those working-class activists attracted by their divergent analyses. Cooperation was

well-meaning, respectable, toothless and rather dull. Revolutionary politics had the dash and fire that orthodox Labour politics often lacked but its influence on working-class life was correspondingly less. Few wanted revolution, fewer still thought it likely, and the parties of the revolutionary Left, though undeniably vocal and belligerent, remained small in numbers and weak in effect.

Objectively, it is clear that the Conservative Party had a far greater popular appeal. Conservatism spoke to the working class not as it ought to be but as it was. While revolutionary politics demanded change and threatened conflict, Conservatism promised stability and appealed to the patriotism, resignation and deference which were important elements in the real consciousness of the working class. Chamberlainism was unquestionably a truer representative of working-class sensibilities than Marxism, and the historian's task is to explain this state of affairs rather than to denigrate it.

The politics of the working class have been both inspiring and disheartening, daring and complacent, but they have been, above all, their own - formed under oppressive and inhospitable conditions, in circumstances demanding sacrifice and endurance from the poorest and most disadvantaged sections of society. Those who follow should applaud their successes, understand their failures, and conduct themselves with all due humility.

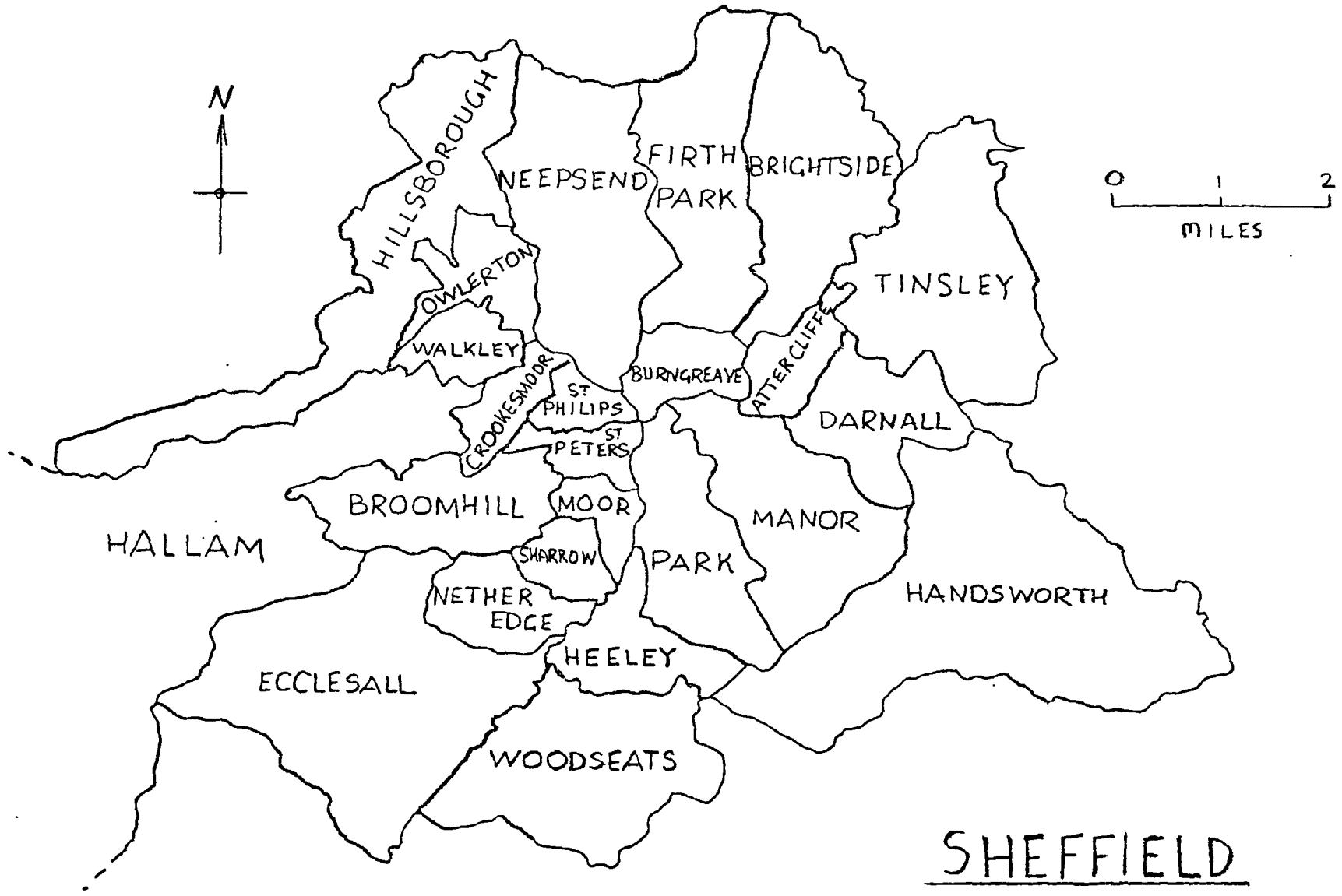
BIRMINGHAM

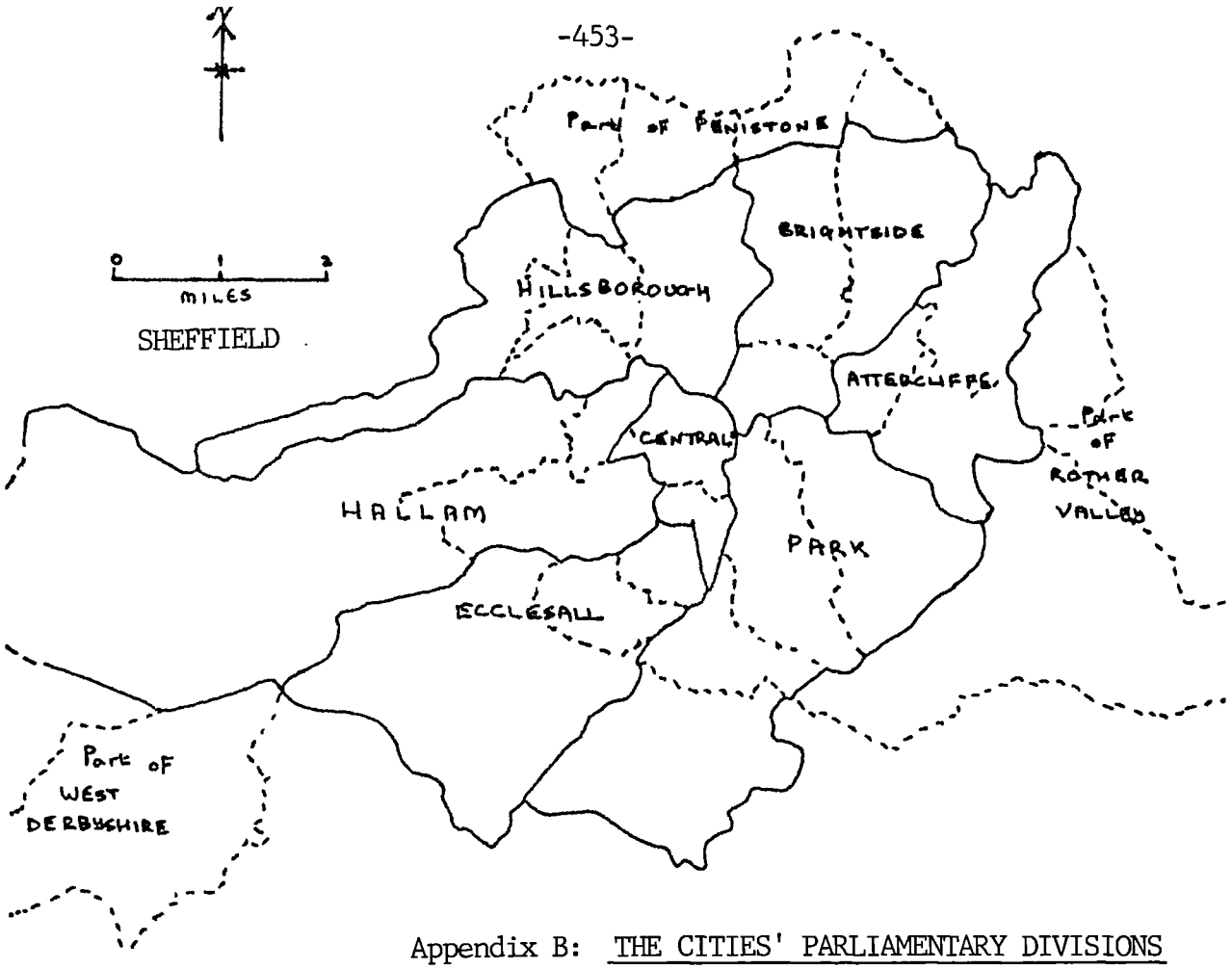
The Inner Ring Wards

1. Market Hall
2. Ladywood
3. St. Paul's
4. St. Mary's
5. Duddeston
6. St. Bartholomew's
7. St. Martin's and Deritend

Appendix A(i): THE MUNICIPAL WARDS OF BIRMINGHAM

Appendix A(ii): THE MUNICIPAL WARDS OF SHEFFIELD, 1929-1931





Appendix B: THE CITIES' PARLIAMENTARY DIVISIONS

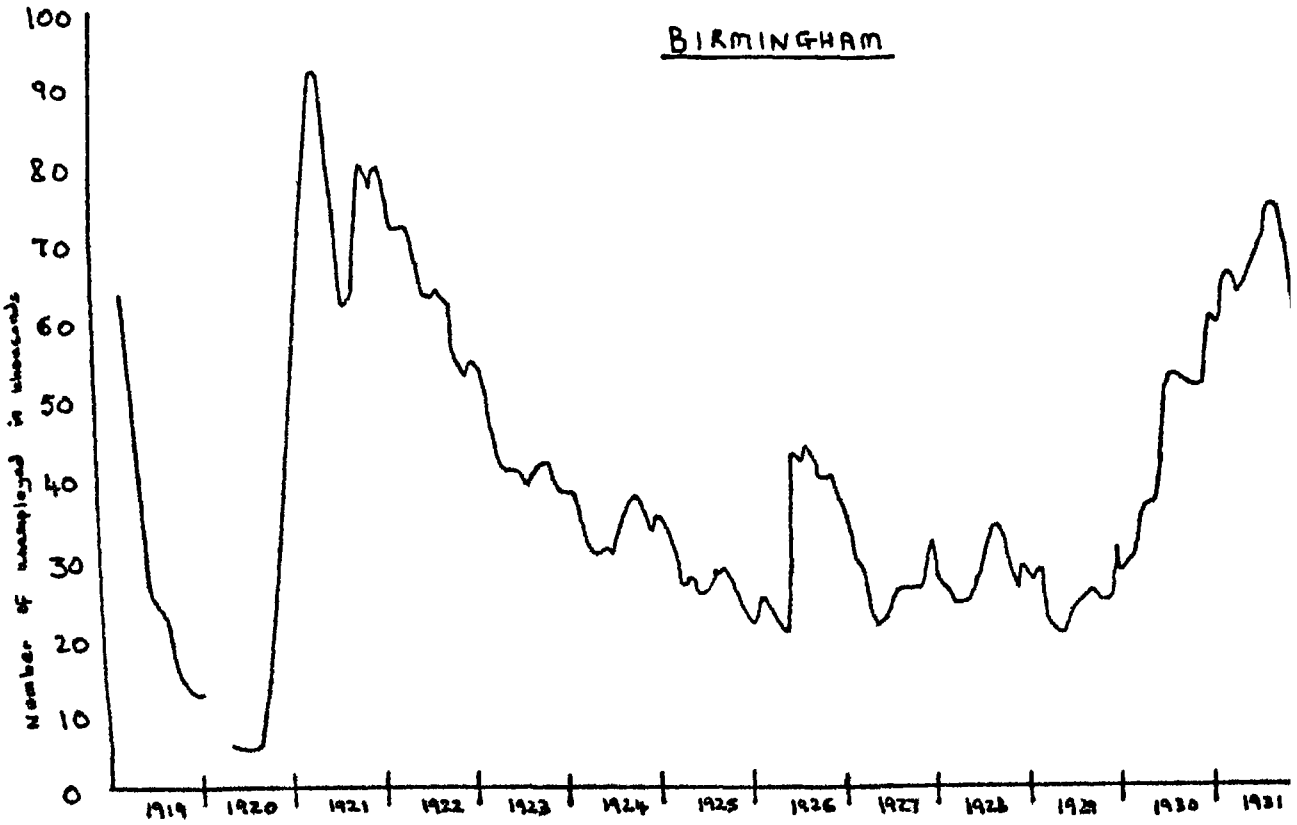
Appendix C: THE OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF THE INSURED WORKFORCES OF BIRMINGHAM AND SHEFFIELD; JULY, 1923

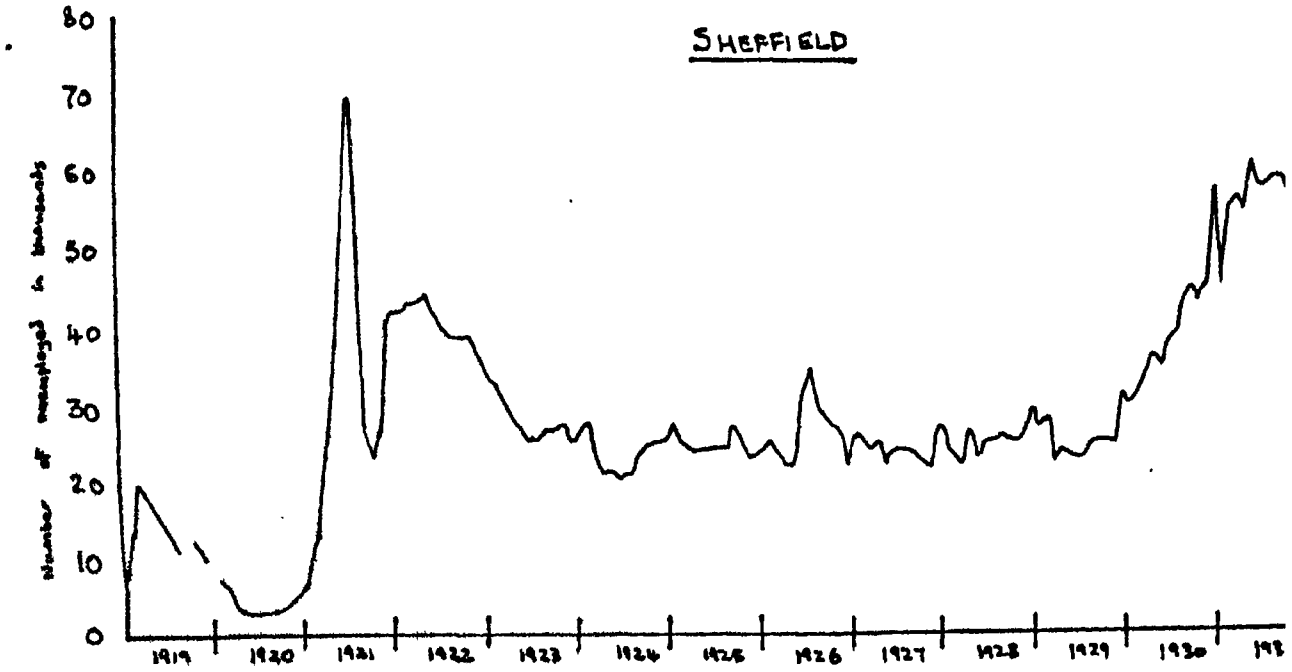
BIRMINGHAM	
Miscellaneous Metal Goods Industries	37,990
Distributive Trades	27,530
Motor Vehicles, Cycles and Aircraft	32,270
Building	14,170
General Engineering	17,090
Metal Manufacturing (other than Iron and Steel).	18,220
Brass and Allied Metal Wares ..	16,610
Electrical Engineering	5,810
Watches, Clocks, Plate, Jewellery ..	21,730
Cocoa, Chocolate, etc.	8,130
Rubber	10,620
Printing, Publishing and Book-binding.	5,650
Furniture Making, Upholstering, etc.	4,540
Chemicals (including Explosives, Oil, Paint, Soap, Ink, etc.).	3,120
Public Works Contracting	3,400
Hotels, Boarding House, etc., Service	6,470
Railway Carriage and Wagons, etc.	3,030
Electrical Cable, Apparatus, Lamps, etc.	2,330
Bread, Biscuits, Cakes, etc. ..	3,700
Stoves, Grates, Pipes, etc.	2,740
Bolts, Nuts, Screws, Nails, etc. ..	5,850
Gas, Water, and Electricity Supply	9,570
Road Transport (other than Tram-way and Omnibus Service).	2,860
Laundries, Job Dyeing and Dry Cleaning.	1,400
Tailoring	2,350
Drink Industries	2,020
Scientific and Photographic Instru-ments and Apparatus.	1,190
Shirts, Collars, Underclothing, etc...	1,560
Glass and Glass Bottles	1,900
Cardboard Boxes, Paper Bags and Stationery.	1,530
Miscellaneous Food Industries ..	2,330
Dressmaking and Millinery	3,190
Leather and Leather Goods ..	2,570
All other Industries and Services ..	37,940
Total, all Industries and Services	321,410

SHEFFIELD	
Iron and Steel (including Pig Iron Manufacture).	29,440
Hand-tools, Cutlery, etc.	18,520
Distributive Trades	12,300
General Engineering, etc.	20,510
Building	6,280
Watches, Clocks, Plate, etc. ..	7,710
Coal Mining	9,260
Miscellaneous Metal Goods Industries	1,840
Metal Manufacture (other than Iron and Steel).	2,110
Gas, Water and Electricity Supply	2,480
Tramway and Omnibus Service ..	2,210
Public Works Contracting	850
Road Transport (other than Tram-way and Omnibus Service).	1,840
Printing, Publishing and Book-binding.	1,800
Furniture Making, Upholstering, etc.	1,050
Hotel, Boarding House, etc., Service	1,970
Cocoa, Chocolate, etc.	700
Chemicals (including Explosives, Oil, Paint, Soap, Ink, etc.).	870
Bread, Biscuits, Cakes, etc. ..	1,030
Brick, Tile, Pipe, etc.	600
Motor Vehicles, Cycles and Aircraft	520
Laundries, Job Dyeing and Dry Cleaning.	580
Drink Industries	1,180
Electrical Engineering	180
Shirts, Collars, Underclothing, etc.	450
All other Industries and Services ..	19,410
Total, all Industries and Services	145,696

Source: Royal Commission on the Geographical Distribution of the Industrial Population, 1937-1939;
Minutes of Evidence; 3, February, 1938, p. 302, p. 306.

Appendix D(i): UNEMPLOYMENT IN BIRMINGHAM AND SHEFFIELD, 1919-1931

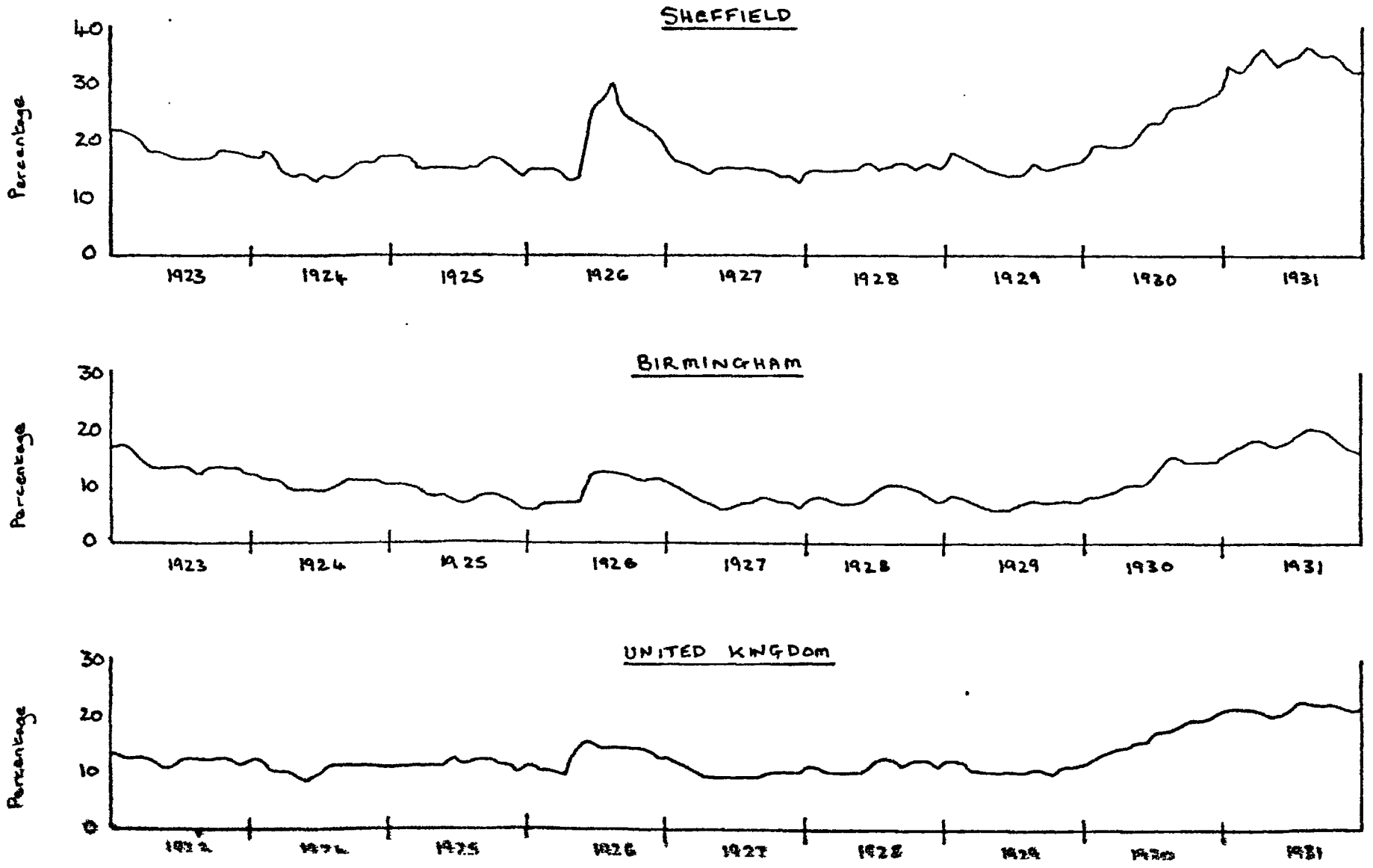




Source: Local press; Ministry of Labour Gazette.

Appendix D(ii): UNEMPLOYMENT AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE INSURED WORKFORCE, 1923-1931

Source: Ministry of Labour Gazette, Local Unemployment Index.



Appendix E(i): MUNICIPAL ELECTION RESULTS IN BIRMINGHAM, 1919-1931

Ward	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	19
Acock's Green	Ind	Ind	Con	Ind	Ind	Con	Ind	Con	Con	Ind	Con	Con	C
All Saints'	Lab	Con	Lab	Lab	Lab	Con	Con	Lab	Con	Lab	Lab	Con	C
Aston	Lab	Lab	Con	Lab	Con	Con	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Con	C
Balsall Heath	Lab	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	C
Duddeston	Ten	Con	Lab	Ten	Con	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	C
Edgbaston	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	C
Erdington N.	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	C
Erdington S.	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	C
Handsworth	Ind	Con	Con	Ind	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	C
Harborne	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	C
King's Norton	Lab	Lib	Lib	Lab	Lib	Con	Con	Lib	Con	Con	Lib	Con	C
Ladywood	Lab	Con	Lab	Con	Con	Con	Con	Lab	Lab	Lab	Con	Con	C
Lozells	Lib	Ind	Con	Lib	Ten	Con	Con	Con	Con	Lib	Con	Con	L
Market Hall	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	C
Moseley	Ind	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	C
Northfield	Ind	Con	Con	Lib	Con	Con	Lib	Con	Con	Ind	Con	Con	C
Perry Barr													C
Rotton Park	Con	Con	Lab	Con	Con	Con	Con	Lab	Con	Con	Ind	Con	C
St. Bart's	Lib	Con	Lib	Lab	Con	Lib	Con	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	C
St. Martin's	Con	Con	Lab	Lab	Con	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	C
St. Mary's	Ind	Con	Ind	Ind	Con	Ind	Ind	Lab	Lab	Ind	Lab	Con	I
St. Paul's	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Lab	Con	Con	Lab	Con	C
Saltley	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Ind	Lab	Lab	Ind	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	C
Sandwell	Ind	Ind	Con	Ind	Ind	Con	Ind	Ind	Con	Ind	Ind	Con	I
Selly Oak	Lab	Con	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Con	C
Small Heath	Lab	Lib	Lab	Con	Lib	Con	Con	Lab	Con	Lab	Lab	Con	C
Soho	Lab	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	C
Sparkbrook	Lab	Con	Lab	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	C
Sparkhill	Con	Con	Lib	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	Con	C
Washwood Heath	Lab	Lib	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	C
Yardley	Lab	Ind	Con	Ind	Ind	Ind	Ind	Ind	Ind	Con	Con	Con	C

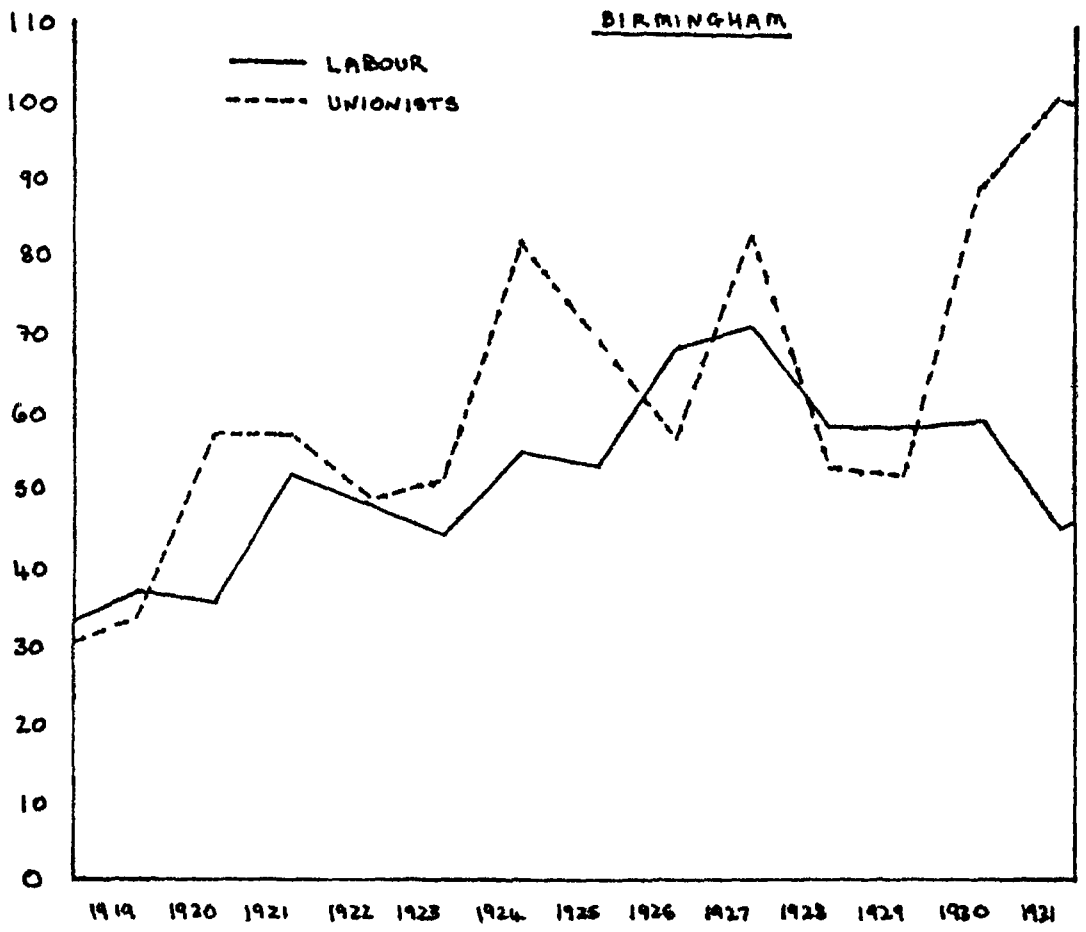
Key: Con = Unopposed return
Con = Unionist Party
Ten = Tenants' Association
Lab = Labour Party
Lib = Liberal Party
Ind = Independent

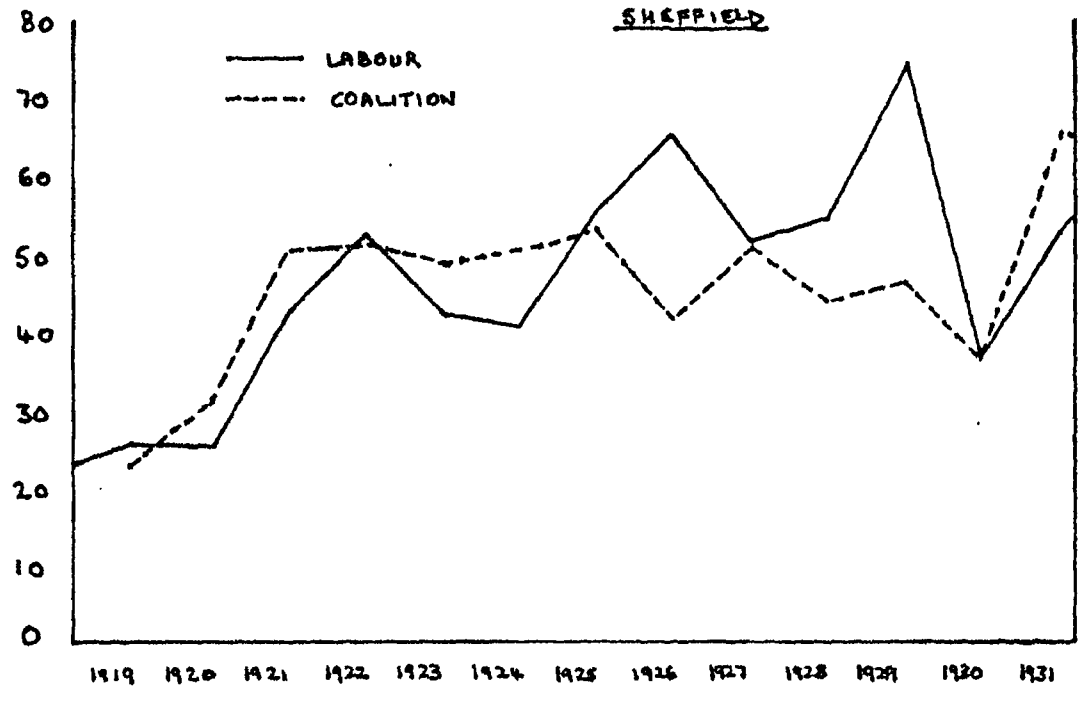
Appendix E(ii): MUNICIPAL ELECTION RESULTS IN SHEFFIELD, 1919-1931

Ward	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929	1930	193
Attercliffe	Lab	Lab	SCA	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	La
Brightside	Lab	SCA	SCA	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	La
Broomhall	SCA	SCA	Lab	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA			
Broomhill											Con	SCA	SC
Burngreave	Lab	SCA	SCA	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	SC
Crookesmoor	Lab	SCA	Lab	SCA	Lab	SCA	Lab	Lab	SCA	SCA	Lab	SCA	SC
Darnall	Lab	Ind	Lab	Lab	SCA	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	La
Ecclesall	SCA	MCU	MCU	SCA	Con	Con	Con	Ind	Con	Con	Con	Con	Co
Firth Park											Lab	SCA	SC
Hallam	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	Con	Ind	SC
Handsworth				Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	La
Heeley	SCA	SCA	SCA	Lab	SCA	SCA	SCA	Lab	SCA	SCA	Lab	SCA	SC
Hillsborough	DSS	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	Lab	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SC
Manor											Lab	Lab	La
Moor											Lab	SCA	SC
Neepsend	Lab	Lab	Lab	Ind	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	La
Nether Edge											Con	Con	Co
Owlerton											Lab	SCA	SC
Park	SCA	Lib	SCA	Lab	SCA	SCA	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	SCA	SC
St. Peter's	DSS	DSS	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	Lab	SCA	SCA	Lab	SCA	SC
St. Philip's	SCA	SCA	Lab	SCA	SCA	Lab	SCA	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	SC
Sharrow	DSS	SCA	SCA	Lab	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SCA	SC
Tinsley											Lab	Lab	Lal
Walkley	Lab	Lib	Lab	Lab	Ind	Lab	Ind	Ind	Lab	Lab	Lab	Ind	In
Woodseats											SCA	SCA	SC

Key: Lab = Unopposed return Lab = Labour Party
Lib = Liberal Party Con = Conservative Party
SCA = Sheffield Citizens' Association/Municipal Progressive Party
DSS = Nat. Fed. of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers
Ind = Independent MCU = Middle Class Union

Appendix E(iii): LABOUR AND ANTI-LABOUR VOTING IN THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS, 1919-1931



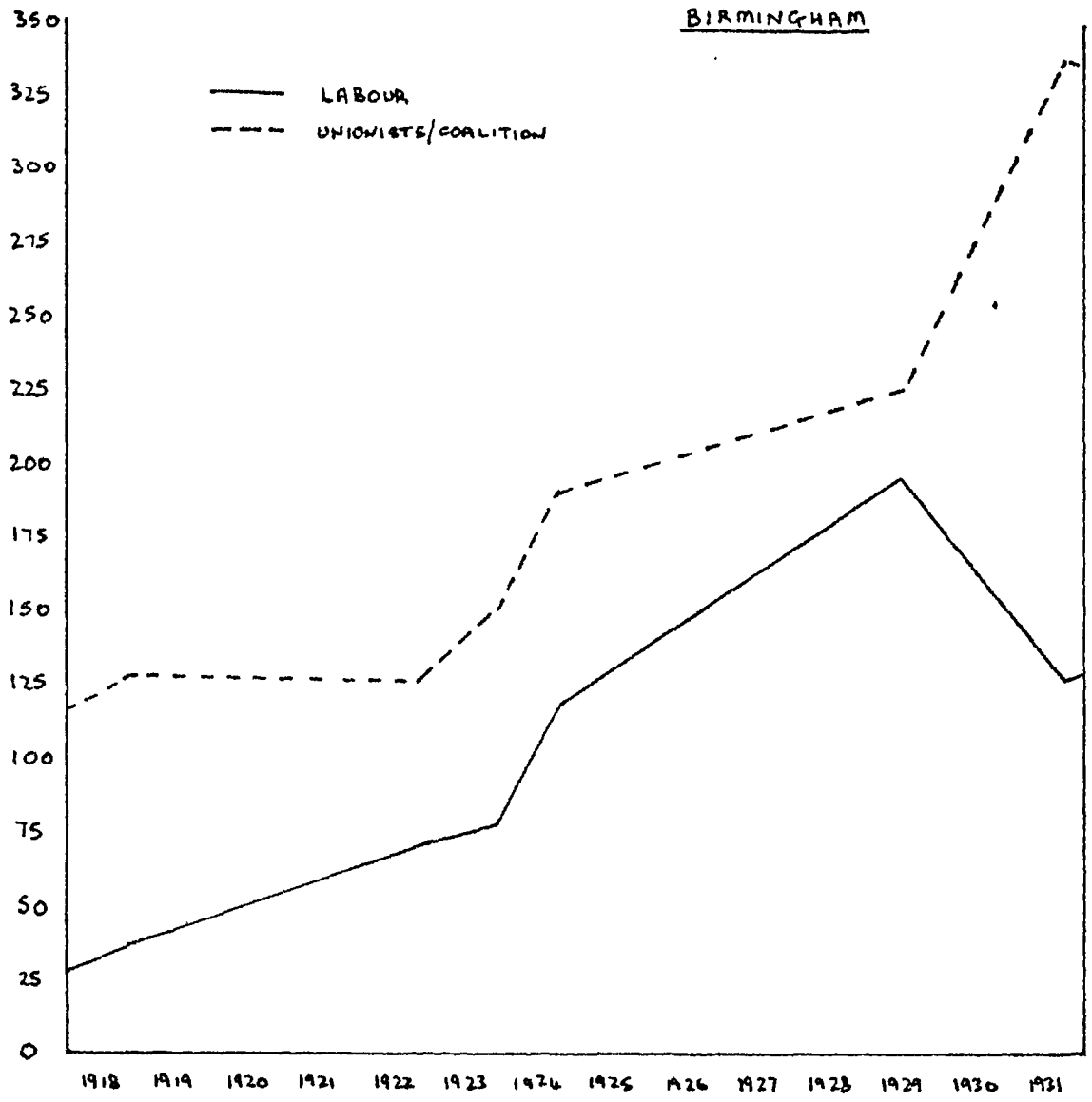


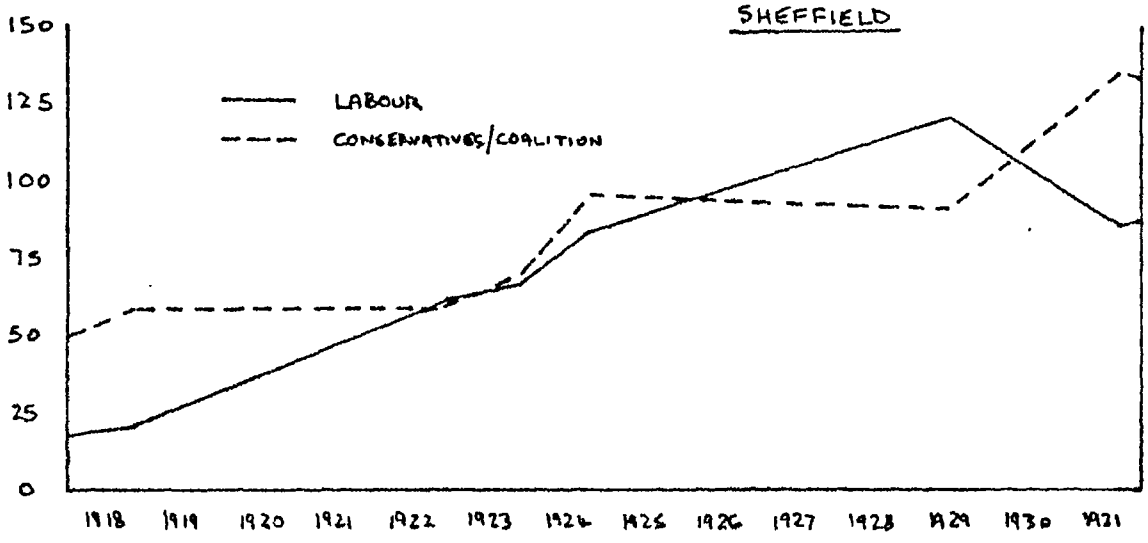
Appendix F(i): PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION RESULTS, 1918-1931

BIRMINGHAM	1918	1922	1923	1924	1929	1931
Aston	CoC	CON	CON	CON	LAB	CON
Deritend	CoC	CON	CON	CON	LAB	CON
Duddeston	NDP	CON	CON	CON	LAB	CON
Edgbaston	CoC	CON	CON	CON	CON	CON
Erdington	CoC	CON	CON	CON	LAB	CON
Handsworth	CoC	CON	CON	CON	CON	CON
King's Norton	CoC	CON	CON	LAB	CON	CON
Ladywood	CoC	CON	CON	CON	LAB	CON
Moseley	CoC	CON	CON	CON	CON	CON
Sparkbrook	CoC	CON	CON	CON	CON	CON
West B'ham	CoC	CON	CON	CON	CON	CON
Yardley	CoC	CON	CON	CON	LAB	CON
SHEFFIELD						
Attercliffe	CoL	LAB	LAB	LAB	LAB	CON
Brightside	CoL	LAB	LAB	LAB	LAB	CON
Central	CoC	CON	CON	CON	LAB	CON
Ecclesall	CoC	CON	CON	CON	CON	CON
Hallam	CoC	CON	CON	CON	CON	CON
Hillsborough	CoL	LAB	LAB	LAB	LAB	CON
Park	CoL	CoL	CON	CON	LAB	CON

Key: CON = Unopposed return
CoC = Coalition Conservative
LAB = Labour Party
CoL = Coalition Liberal
CON = Conservative and Unionist Party

Appendix F(ii): LABOUR AND ANTI-LABOUR VOTING IN THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, 1918-1931





Appendix G: A SAMPLE PROGRAMME OF THE LABOUR CHURCH; SPARKHILL AND TYSELEY, 1926-1927

October, 3, 1926:	Labour Church Orchestra. Readings by the Guildhouse Players.
October, 10, 1926:	Miss E. Shanks, 'The League of Nations'.
October, 17, 1926:	Wilfred Wellock.
October, 24, 1926:	Fred Longden, 'The Need for a Workers' Movement'.
October, 31, 1926:	Oswald Mosley, Frank Coleman (Labour's municipal candidate). Mary Sheldon, 'Listening'.
November, 7, 1926:	Hubert Humphreys with readings from 'Androcles and the Lion' by G.B. Shaw.
November, 14, 1926:	Harrison Barrow, 'A Visit to Czechoslovakia'.
November, 21, 1926:	A.H. Noble, 'The Mining Situation'.
November, 28, 1926:	Jesse Hammond, 'The League of Nations'.
December, 5, 1926:	A. Purcell, M.P.
December, 12, 1926:	Jack Mills, 'Housing and Labour's Programme'.
December, 19, 1926:	Musical Evening.
January, 2, 1927:	W.H. Ayles, 'A Survey of World Politics'.
January, 9, 1927:	Rev. Mason, 'Rent, Interest and Profit'.
January, 16, 1927:	Cllr. Watkins, 'The City's Trading Concerns'.
January, 23, 1927:	Miss F.B. Widdowson, 'Education'.
January, 30, 1927:	Tom Hackett, '19th. and 20th. Century Democratic Movements'.
February, 6, 1927:	S.B. Potter, 'China'.
February, 13, 1927:	Orchestral selections and discussion.
February, 20, 1927:	Mrs. Carol Ring, 'Tragedies of Industry in the Past'.
February, 27, 1927:	Tom Henderson, M.P., 'Rumours of War'.
March, 6, 1927:	Mrs. Sproson, 'The Mental Deficiency Act'.
March, 13, 1927:	Dr. Ernest Bulmer, 'Problems of the Birth Rate' (Open to those over 18yrs. only).
March, 20, 1927:	Cllr. Sawyer, 'The Politics of the Land Question'.
March, 27, 1927:	Musical Evening.

Source: Town Crier

Appendix H: SAMPLE PROGRAMMES OF THE COOPERATIVE GUILD

Alston Cooperative Womens' Guild, January-June, 1928

1. Opening social
2. 'Aftercare Work'
3. 'Guild Organisation'
4. 'Purpose of Coop. Education'
5. Shop Practice
6. Election night
7. 'Feet and Footware'
8. Visit to Confectionery Dept.
9. 'The Family Income'
10. Discussion of BCS balance sheet
11. 'The Work of the Education Ctee.'
12. 'Flowers of the Coop. Garden'
13. 'Care of the Mother'
14. Sing, Say or Pay
15. 'Emergency Fund'
16. 'Convalescent Fund'
17. Open date
18. 'Cooperation and Parliament'
19. Annual report, Congress resolutions
20. Visit to dairy
21. Discussion of BCS balance sheet
22. Outing
23. Congress report
24. 'Cooperative Education'
25. Meeting at playing fields
26. 'Bernard Shaw'
27. Visit to Crippled Children's Home
28. Open date

Ward End Cooperative Men's Guild, January-June, 1928

1. New Year's social
2. Games competition
3. W.T. Cardinal
4. Five minute speeches
5. General business and reports
6. Social evening
7. Games competition
8. 'A Few Thoughts on Banking'
9. General business and reports
10. Birthday party
11. 'Extraordinary Men of 19th. C.'
12. Games competition
13. Social evening
14. Debate
15. 'Through Trade to Coop Commonwealth'
16. Debate
17. Election of officers
18. Social evening
19. Open night
20. Bowls practice
21. General business
22. Games competition

Items in quotation marks are addresses by visiting speakers.

Source: B[irmingham] C[ooperative] S[ociety] Handbook, January-June, 1928.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I PRIMARY SOURCES

(a) Unpublished

Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (Foundry Workers' Section), Sheffield District Office

National Union of Foundry Workers, Sheffield Committee minutes, 1923-1931

Birmingham Central Library

(i) Labour, Cooperative and Trades Union records:
Aston Cooperative Party minutes and cash books, 1930-1931
Bedstead Workers' Association, Executive Committee minutes, 1918-1931
Birmingham Borough Labour Party minutes, 1918-1931
Birmingham Cooperative Party minutes, account books, municipal and parliamentary election accounts, 1918-1931
Birmingham District Committee of the Women's Cooperative Guild, Executive Committee minutes, 1919-1931
Birmingham Trades Council minutes, 1918-1931
Birmingham Trades Council, General Strike, 1926; A Collection of Bulletins, Leaflets, Correspondence, etc.
Birmingham Trade Union Emergency Committee minutes, May, 1926
Cadbury Bros. Ltd., Correspondence, memoranda, etc. between Cadbury Bros. and various Birmingham trade union bodies
Harborne Men's Cooperative Guild minutes, 1926-1931
Harborne Women's Cooperative Guild, 1918-1923
NUGMW (Birmingham and Western District), District Committee minutes, 1921-1931
NUGMW (Birmingham and Western District), minutes and reports of District Council meetings, 1923-1931
Papers of Jim Simmons
Yardley Cooperative Party, membership contribution book, 1932

(ii) Unionist records:
Birmingham Unionist Association, Letters relating to West Birmingham Constituency, 1922-1937
Birmingham Unionist Association minutes, 1918-1931
Birmingham Unionist Association, Junior Council minutes, 1932
Erdington Division Women's Unionist Branch minutes, 1922-1931
Ladywood Division Unionist Association minutes, 1918-1931
Ladywood Ward Women's Unionist Association minutes, 1919-1931
Moseley Division Unionist Association, miscellaneous documents

(iii) Miscellaneous
Birmingham Municipal Election Literature, 1918-1931
Birmingham Parliamentary Election Literature, 1918-1931
WEA, Birmingham branch minutes, 1918-1931
WEA, King's Norton branch minutes, 1923-1925

Bodleian Library, Oxford

Papers of Arthur, Lord Ponsonby

Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, York

Papers of Wilfrid Whiteley

British Library of Political and Economic Science, London

Birmingham Central Railway Strike Committee minutes, May, 1926

Churchill College, Cambridge

Papers of A.V. Alexander

Communist Party Headquarters, London

Sheffield Communist Party minutes, 1920-1924

Labour Party Archives, London

Council of Action records, 1920
J.S. Middleton correspondence

Marx Memorial Library, London

Hannington and Maud Brown Papers on National Unemployed Workers' Movement

Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick

ISTC, miscellaneous documents and records
National Minority Movement, Midland Bureau minutes, 1929-1931 (xerox)
Penworkers' Federation minutes, correspondence, miscellaneous records, 1918-1931

In possession of Mr. Bill Moore, Sheffield

Miscellaneous documents and leaflets of the Sheffield branches of the National Minority Movement and the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, and the Sheffield Left-Wing Labour Committee

Public Record Office, London

CAB 24; Reports on Revolutionary Organisations in the U.K.
LAB 10/5; Trade Union Reactions to the Proposed Trade Union Legislation, 1927

Saltley Local History Project, Birmingham

Tape transcripts

Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh

Papers of Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland

Sheffield City Library

(i) Labour, Cooperative and Trades Union records:
ASLEF, Sheffield no. 1 branch minutes, 1918-1931
Papers of Albert Ballard
Pen and Pocket Blade Forgers' Protection Society minutes and miscellaneous documents, 1918-1931
Sheffield Cooperative Party minutes, miscellaneous correspondence and documents
Sheffield Cooperative Party Rambling Club minutes, 1921-1931

(ii) Conservative:
Brightside Conservative Association minutes, 1918-1923
Central Division Women's Conservative Association, Executive Committee minutes, 1927-1931
City of Sheffield Conservative Women's Advisory Committee minutes, 1930-1931
Ecclesall Conservative Association minutes, 1919-1931
Sheffield Conservative Association, minutes of AGMs, 1918-1928

(iii) Miscellaneous
Sheffield Social Survey Committee; miscellaneous materials used in preparation of reports on housing, unemployment, etc.

University of Birmingham Library

Papers of Sir Austen Chamberlain
Papers of Neville Chamberlain

University of Sheffield Library

Papers of Joseph Madin

Microfilm and microfiche

Sheffield Trades and Labour Council minutes, annual reports, miscellaneous documents and correspondence, 1918-1931
Sheffield ILP minutes, 1918-1923
Attercliffe ILP minutes and miscellaneous documents, 1918-1923 (EP Microform)

Birmingham City ILP minutes, 1924-1928 (Harvester Microform)

National Labour Party, NEC and Subcommittee minutes, 1918-1931 (Harvester Microfiche)

Francis Johnson correspondence, ILP archives (Harvester Microform)

(b) Published

Newpapers

(i) National:
The Call, 1918-1920
The Communist, 1920-1923
Labour Leader/New Leader, 1918-1931
The Socialist, 1918-1923
Sunday Worker, 1925-1928
The Times, selected editions
Workers' Dreadnought, 1918-1923
Workers' Life, 1927-1929
Workers' Weekly, 1923-1927

(ii) Birmingham:
Birmingham District Commonwealth, 1922
Birmingham Despatch, selected editions
Birmingham Gazette, 1918-1931
Birmingham Mail, 1918-1931
Birmingham Post, 1918-1931
Deritend Commonwealth, 1930-1931
King's Norton Labour News, 1928-1931
Labour Torch, 1924-1930
Progress, 1925-1926
The Spark, 1928
Straight Forward, 1920-1931
Town Crier, 1919-1931
Unionist Messenger, 1928-1929

(iii) Sheffield:
Park and Heeley Gazette, 1930-1931
Progressive Standard, 1930-1931
Sheffield Citizen, 1923-1927
Sheffield Cooperator, 1922-1931
Sheffield Daily Independent, 1918-1931
Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 1918-1931
Sheffield Forward, 1921-1927
The Worker, 1919-1920

Periodicals

Adult School Movement, One and All (Midlands supplement), selected editions
ASE/AEU, Monthly Journal, 1918-1931
ASGMGW, Monthly Journal of the Amalgamated Society of Gas, Municipal and General Workers, 1918-1920
Birmingham Cooperative Society, The Wheatsheaf (local insert), selected editions
Cadbury Bros. Ltd., Bournville Works Magazine, 1919-1931
Dunlop Rubber Co., Dunlop Gazette, 1919-1931
Edgar Allen and Co., Edgar Allen Works and Sports Magazine, 1920-1931
ISTC, Man and Metal, 1923-1931
Labour Party, Labour Organiser, 1921-1931

NSBMM, Quarterly Journal, 1918-1921
NUFW, Monthly Journal, 1920-1931
Plebs League/National Council of Labour Colleges, Plebs, 1918-1931
Sheffield Chamber of Commerce, Chamber of Commerce Journal, 1919-1929
UPOW, Birmingham District Council, The Fellowship, 1921-1926
UPOW, Birmingham District Council, Forward, 1928-1931
Workers' Union, Workers' Union Record, 1918-1926

Government Publications

Board of Trade Working Party Reports, Jewellery and Silverware (1946)

Chief Inspector of Factories, Annual Reports, 1918-1931

Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies, Annual Reports, 1918-1932

Committee on Trade and Industry, Survey of Metal Industries (1928)

Ministry of Labour, Directory of Employers' Associations, Trade Unions, Joint Organisations, Etc., 1932 (1932)

Ministry of Labour Gazette, 1918-1931

Ministry of Labour, Local Unemployment Index, 1927-1931

Ministry of Labour, Minutes of Evidence taken before the Committee of Inquiry into the Working and Effects of the Trade Boards Acts (1922)

Parliamentary Accounts and Papers, various, Returns of Parliamentary Election Expenses

Royal Commission on the Geographical Distribution of the Industrial Population, Minutes of Evidence (1937-1939)

Royal Commission on Unemployment Insurance, Minutes of Evidence (1931)

R.S. Smirke (for the Board of Trade), Report on Birmingham Trades: The Brass Trade (1914)

Census of England and Wales, 1921

Census of England and Wales, 1931

Statistical Abstract for the U.K. for each of the fifteen years, 1913 and 1918-1931 (1933), Cmd 4233

Final Report of the Fourth Census of Production (1930). Part II, The Iron and Steel Trades (1934)

Local Authority Publications

(i) Birmingham:
Birmingham Corporation, Birmingham Commercial and Industrial Handbook (1919)

_____, Birmingham Commercially Considered (1928)

_____, Birmingham. The Hub of Industrial England (1931)

_____, Memorandum of Evidence Submitted by the Corporation of Birmingham to the Royal Commission on the Geographical Distribution of the Industrial Population (1937)

_____, General Statistics and Epitome of the City's Accounts, 1930

Birmingham Medical Officer of Health, Annual Reports, 1918-1932

W.S. Body (ed.), Birmingham and Its Civic Managers (1928)

(ii) Sheffield

Sheffield Corporation, Valuation List for the Sheffield Rating Area, 1930

Sheffield Medical Officer of Health, Annual Reports, 1918-1932

Miscellaneous Contemporary Publications

Birmingham Clarion Cinderella Club, Annual Reports, 1918-1927

Birmingham Cooperative Society, Handbooks, 1918-1932

_____, Interesting Facts and Figures for Prospective Members (1931)

Birmingham Trades Council and Borough Labour Party, Annual Reports, 1918-193

_____, Souvenir Programme of May Day Demonstration, May, 2, 1926

Independent Labour Party, Annual Conference Reports, 1918-1932

_____, Preliminary Agenda for Annual Conference, 1930

_____, ILP Easter Conference, 1930. Birmingham Souvenir Programme

Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, Quarterly Reports, 1926-1931

Labour Party, Annual Conference Reports, 1918-1932

Sheffield Clarion Ramblers, Handbooks, 1918-1932

Sheffield and Ecclesall Cooperative Society, 200th. Quarterly Report and and Balance Sheet (1924)

WEA, Yorkshire District (South), Annual Report, 1930

Cornish's Year Book, 1918-1932

Sheffield Year Book, 1918-1932

Contemporary Publications by Local Authors

A. Barton, The Burden of Interest and How to Avoid It (Sheffield, 1920)

_____, A World History for the Workers (1923)

F. Longden, Why This Unemployment? A Socialist View of its Origin and Solution (1924)

J.T. Murphy, The Workers' Committee. An Outline of its Principles and Structure (1917)

A. Ponsonby, Religion in Politics (1923)

J. Strachey, Revolution by Reason (1925)

J.E. Southall, 'Margate and the Left Wing', Labour Monthly, 8, 10, (October, 1926)

Interviews

Cllr. Albert Jackson
Ray Jones
Lily Moody
Bill Moore
Mrs. Potter
Ted Smallbone

II SECONDARY WORKS

(a) Relating to Birmingham

Allen, G.C., 'Methods of Industrial Organisation in the West Midlands, 1860-1927', Economic Journal, Economic History Series, 4, (January, 1929)

_____, The Industrial Development of Birmingham and the Black Country (1966)

Barnes, J., Nicholson, D. (eds), The Leo Amery Diaries, Vol. 1, 1896-1929 (1980)

Behagg, C., 'Custom, Class and Change: the Trade Societies of Birmingham', Social History, IV, 3, (1979).

Birmingham Public Libraries, The Nine Days in Birmingham (Birmingham, 1976)

Bournville Village Trust, When We Build Again (1941)

_____, The Bournville Village Trust, 1900-1955 (Birmingham, 1955)

Brazier, R.H., Sandford, E., Birmingham and the Great War, 1914-1919 (Birmingham, 1921)

Briggs, A., 'Thomas Attwood and the Economic Background of the Birmingham Political Union', Cambridge Historical Journal, 2, (1948)

_____, 'The Background of the Parliamentary Reform Movement in Three English Cities', Cambridge Historical Journal, 3, (1952)

_____, History of Birmingham. Vol II, Borough and City, 1865-1938 (1952)

_____, Victorian Cities (1963)

Cannadine, A., 'The Calthorpe Family in Birmingham, 1810-1910. A "Conservative Interest" Examined', Historical Journal, XVIII, 4, (1975)

Chesterton, A.K., Oswald Mosley. Portrait of a Leader (N.D.)

Chapman, S.D., 'The Contribution of Building Clubs and the Freehold Land Society to Working-Class Housing in Birmingham' in Chapman, S.D. (ed.) The History of Working-Class Housing (Newton Abbot, 1971)

Church, R.A., Herbert Austin. The British Motor Car Industry to 1941 (1979)

Church, R.A., Smith, B., 'Competition and Monopoly in the Coffin Furniture Industry, 1870-1915', Economic History Review, IXX, 3, (1966)

Corbett, J., The Birmingham Trades Council, 1866-1966 (1966)

Dalley, W.A., The Life Story of W.J. Davis, J.P. (Birmingham, 1914)

Dayus, K., Her People (1982)

Dilks, D., Neville Chamberlain. Vol. 1, Pioneering and Reform, 1869-1929 (1984)

Feiling, K. The Life of Neville Chamberlain (1970)

Garratt, V.W., Man in the Street (1939)

Green, C., 'Birmingham Politics, 1873-1891. The Local Basis of Change', Midland History, 2, 2, (1973)

Griffiths, P.C., 'The Caucus and the Liberal Party in 1886', History, 62, 2, (1973)

Hastings, R.P., 'Aspects of the General Strike in Birmingham, 1926', Midland History, 2, 4, (1974)

_____, 'Birmingham' in Skelley, J. (ed.), The General Strike, 1926 (1976)

Hennock, E.P., 'Finance and Politics in Urban Local Government in England, 1835-1900', Historical Journal, VI, 2, (1963)

_____, 'The Social Composition of Borough Councils in Two Large Cities, 1835-1914' in Dyos, H.J. (ed.), The Study of Urban History (1968)

Herrick, F., 'The Origins of the National Liberal Federation', Journal of Modern History, 2, (1965)

Jay, R., Joseph Chamberlain. A Political Study (Oxford, 1981)

Massey, P.H., 'Slum', The Architects' Journal, 22;6;1932

Money, J., Experience and Identity: Birmingham and the West Midlands, 1760-1800 (Manchester, 1977)

Morris, D.S., Newton, K., 'Profile of a Local Political Elite: Businessmen on Birmingham City Council, 1920-1966', University of Birmingham Faculty of Commerce and Social Science, Discussion Papers, Series F, 6, (May, 1969)

Nockolds, H., Lucas: the First Hundred Years (1976)

Roberts, S., 'Politics and the Birmingham Working Class: the General Elections of 1900 and 1906 in East Birmingham', West Midlands Studies 15, (Winter, 1982)

Rushbrooke, J.L., Birmingham's Black Spots (Birmingham, 1934)

Saltley Local History Project, Scrubbing What Wasn't Dirty (Birmingham, 1983)

Simmons, J., Soap-Box Evangelist (Chichester, 1972)

Skidelsky, R., Oswald Mosley (1975)

Smith, T., (ed.), History of the Birmingham Cooperative Society Ltd., 1881-1931 (Birmingham, 1931)

Sutcliffe, A., 'A Century of Flats' in Sutcliffe, A., (ed.), Multi-Storey Living (1974)

Tholfsen, T., 'The Chartist Crisis in Birmingham', International Review of of Social History, III, (1958)

Tiptaft, N., The City Father (1925)

_____, The History of the Birmingham and District Works Amateur Football Association (1905-1955) (Birmingham, 1955)

Whates, H.R.G., The Birmingham Post, 1857-1957 (Birmingham, 1957)

Williams, I.O., The Firm of Cadbury, 1831-1931 (1931)

Wise, M.J., 'Some Factors Influencing the Growth of Birmingham', Geography, 33, (1948)

_____, (ed.), Birmingham and Its Regional Setting (Birmingham, 1950)

Wright, A., Shackleton, R., Worlds of Labour: Essays in Birmingham Labour History (Birmingham, 1983)

'An Interview with Wilfrid Whiteley', Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History, 18, (1969)

(b) Relating to Sheffield

Abercrombie, P., Sheffield. A Civic Survey (1924)

Albaya, W., Through the Green Door (Sheffield, 1980)

Baxter, J., The Battle of Walkley (Sheffield, 1983)

Brown, J., 'Attercliffe, 1894: How One Local Liberal Party Failed to Meet the Challenge of Labour', Journal of British Studies, XIV, 2, (May, 1975)

Green, A., Growing Up in Attercliffe (Sheffield, 1981)

Hampton, W., Democracy and Community. A Study of Politics in Sheffield (197C

Hill, H. Freedom to Roam (Ashbourne, 1980)

Holberry Society, General Strike in Sheffield. Documents of the Strike with an Introduction by Bill Moore (Sheffield, 1981)

Jameson, N., 'A Study of Sheffield', Journal of the Manchester Geographical Society, LXVI, (1935-1936)

Jones, G.P., A Report on the Development of Adult Education in Sheffield (Sheffield, 1932)

Keeble Hawson, H., Sheffield. The Growth of a City (Sheffield, 1968)

Linton, D.L., (ed.), Sheffield and Its Region (Sheffield, 1956)

Lloyd, G.I.H., The Cutlery Trades (1913)

Mendelson, J. et al., Sheffield Trades and Labour Council, 1858-1958 (Sheffield, N.D.)

Owen, A.D.K., A Report on the Housing Problem in Sheffield (Sheffield, 1931)

_____, A Report on Unemployment in Sheffield (Sheffield, 1932)

_____, A Survey of the Standard of Living in Sheffield (Sheffield, 1933)

Peck, J.A, The Miners' Strike in South Yorkshire, 1926 (Sheffield, 1970)

Pollard, S., 'The Ethics of the Sheffield Outrages', Transactions of the Hunter Archaeological Society, VII, (1953-1954)

_____, A History of Labour in Sheffield (Liverpool, 1959)

Pollard, S., Holmes, C., (eds), Essays in the Economic and Social History of South Yorkshire (Sheffield, 1976)

Reedman, J.N., A Report on a Survey of Licensing in Sheffield (Sheffield, 1931)

St. Philip's Settlement, The Equipment of the Workers (1919)

Sheffield City Council Labour Group, Six Years of Labour Rule (Sheffield, N.D

Styring, R., My Life Story (Frome, 1940)

Thomas, V., Ballard, A., Forty Years of Labour Rule in Sheffield (Sheffield, N.D.)

Townsend, H., 'The Structure and Problems of the Sheffield Cutlery Trade', District Bank Review, (March, 1954)

Vickers Ltd., Short History of the Vickers Company (Sheffield, 1920)

Wilson, A.C., Cecil Henry Wilson, 1862-1945 (Sheffield, N.D.)

Edward Carpenter Memorial Service, 1947. Programme and Record of 1946 Service

Edward Carpenter Memorial Service, 1948. Programme and Record of 1947 Service

'An Interview with Len Youle', Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History, 20, (Spring, 1970)

Sheffield and District Works Sports Association. Golden Jubilee, 1919-1969, Souvenir Booklet (Sheffield, 1969)

'Sheffield Today; a Review of its Industrial Activities', Empire Mail and Overseas Trade, (February, 1927)

Sheffield. The Arsenal of the World (Sheffield, 1916)

(c) General

Aldcroft, D.H., The Interwar Economy (1970)

Astor, J.J., (ed.), The Third Winter of Unemployment (1923)

Barker, B., 'The Anatomy of Reformism. The Social and Political Ideas of the Labour Leadership in Yorkshire', International Review of Social History, XVIII, (1973)

Bassett, R., Nineteen Thirty-One (1958)

Beer, S., British Politics in the Collectivist Age (New York, 1969)

Bellamy, J., Saville, J., (eds), Dictionary of Labour Biography, 6 vols, (1972-1982)

Blondel, J., Voters, Parties and Leaders (Harmondsworth, 1963)

Bowley, M., Housing and the State (1947)

Briggs, A., Saville, J., (eds), Essays in Labour History, 1886-1923 (1971)

Bracher, S.V., The Herald Book of Labour Members (1923)

Bulmer, M., (ed.), Working-Class Images of Society (1975)

Burn, D., The Economic History of Steelmaking, 1867-1939 (Cambridge, 1961)

Burnett, J., A Social History of Housing, 1815-1970 (Newton Abbot, 1978)

Butler, D., Stokes, D., Political Change in Britain (1969)

Carbery, T.F., Consumers in Politics (Manchester, 1969)

Clayton, J., The Rise and Decline of Socialism In Great Britain, 1884-1924 (1926)

Clegg, H., General Union (Oxford, 1954)

Cole, G.D.H. (ed.), British Trades Unionism Today (1945)

Cook, C., Stevenson, J., The Slump (1977)

Cook, C., Taylor, I., (eds), The Labour Party. An Introduction to its History, Structure and Politics (1980)

Crewe, I., 'Party Identification Theory and Political Change in Britain' in Crewe, I., et al. (eds), Party Identification and Beyond (1976)

Dennis, N., et al., Coal is Our Life (1969)

Drake, B., Women in the Engineering Trades (1918)

_____, Women in Trade Unions (1920)

Drucker, H.M., Doctrine and Ethos in the Labour Party (1979)

Forester, T., The Labour Party and the Working Class (1976)

Glynn, S., Oxborrow, J., Interwar Britain. A Social and Economic History (1976)

Goldthorpe, J., et al., The Affluent Worker: Political Attitudes and Behaviour (1968)

Graubard, S., British Labour and the Russian Revolution, 1917-1924 (Cambridge, USA, 1956)

Griffiths, D., (ed.), What is Socialism? A Symposium (1924)

Hinton, J., The First Shop Stewards' Movement (1973)

Hoggart, R., The Uses of Literacy (Harmondsworth, 1981)

Howell, D., British Workers and the Independent Labour Party, 1888-1906 (Manchester, 1983)

Hyman, R., The Workers' Union (Oxford, 1971)

Inglis, K.S., Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England (1963)

Jessop, B., Traditionalism, Conservatism and British Political Culture (1974)

Kerr, M., The People of Ship Street (1958)

Kirby, M.W., The British Coalmining Industry, 1870-1946 (1977)

Klugmann, J., History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 2 vols, (1968, 1969)

Knupfer, G., 'Portrait of the Underdog' in Bendix, R., Lipset, S.M., (eds), Class, Status and Power (1967)

Leeson, R.A., Strike. A Live History, 1887-1971 (1973)

Lipset, S.M., Political Man (1966)

Lockwood, D., 'Sources of Variation in Working-Class Images of Society', Sociological Review, 14, 3, (November, 1966)

Macfarlane, L.J., The British Communist Party (1966)

Macintyre, S., 'British Labour, Marxism and Working-Class Apathy in the Nineteen Twenties', Historical Journal, 20, 2, (1977)

_____, A Proletarian Science (Cambridge, 1980)

McKenzie, R., Silver, A., Angels in Marble. Working-Class Conservatives in Urban England (1968)

McKibbin, R., The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924 (1974)

Martin, R., Communism and the British Trade Unions, 1924-1933 (Oxford, 1969

Matthew, H.G.G., et al., 'The Franchise Factor in the Rise of the Labour Party', English Historical Review, XCI, (October, 1976)

Miliband, R., Parliamentary Socialism (New York, 1964)

More, C., Skill and the English Working Class, 1870-1914 (1968)

Morris, M., (ed.), The General Strike (Harmondsworth, 1976)

Mowat, C.L., Britain Between the Wars, 1918-1940 (1968)

Newby, H., 'The Deferential Dialectic', Comparative Studies in Society and History, 17, (1975)

Newton, K., The Sociology of British Communism (1969)

_____, 'Turnout and Marginality in Local Elections', British Journal of Political Science, 2, (1972)

Nordlinger, E., The Working-Class Tories (1967)

Parkin, F., 'Working-Class Conservatives: a Theory of Political Deviance', British Journal of Sociology, 18, (1967)

Pierson, S., British Socialists. The Journey from Fantasy to Politics (Cambridge, USA, 1979)

Plummer, A., New British Industries in the Twentieth Century (1937)

Pugh, A., Men of Steel (1951)

Pulzer, P.G.J., Political Representation and Elections in Britain (1967)

Ramsbottom, E.C., 'The Course of Wage Rates in the United Kingdom, 1921-1934' Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, 98, IV, (1935)

Reid., F., 'Socialist Sunday Schools in Britain, 1892-1939', International Review of Social History, XI, (1966)

Rhodes, G.W., 'Cooperative-Labour Relations, 1900-1962', Cooperative College Papers, 8, (1962)

Roberts, K. et al., The Fragmentary Class Structure (1977)

Roberts, R., The Classic Slum (Harmondsworth, 1980)

Runciman, W.G., Relative Deprivation and Social Justice (1972)

Salaman, G., 'Two Occupational Communities. Examples of a Remarkable Convergence of Work and Non-Work', Sociological Review, 19, (1971)

_____, Community and Occupation (1974)

Samuel, R., 'The Workers' Theatre Movement', History Workshop Journal, 4, (Autumn, 1977)

_____, 'The Middle Classes Between the Wars', New Socialist, (March-April, 1983)

Shergold, P.R., Working-Class Life. The "American Standard" in Perspective, 1899-1913 (Pittsburgh, 1982)

Smith, D., Conflict and Compromise. Class Formation in English Society, 1830-1914 (1982)

Springhall, J., Youth, Empire and Society. British Youth Movements, 1883-1940 (1977)

Stacey, M., Tradition and Change (1960)

Taylor, A.J.P., English History, 1914-1945 (1965)

Thompson, E.P., The Making of the English Working Class (Harmondsworth, 1968

Todd, N., 'Labour Women: the Bexley Branch of the British Labour Party, 1945-1950', Journal of Contemporary History, 8, 2, (1973)

Whiting, R.C., The View from Cowley: the Impact of Industrialisation upon Oxford, 1918-1939 (Oxford, 1983)

Wertheimer, E., Portrait of the Labour Party (1929)

Winter, J., Socialism and the Challenge of War (1974)

Yates, M.L., Wages and Labour Conditions in British Engineering (1937)

Yeo, S., 'A New Life. The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896', History Workshop Journal, 4, (Autumn, 1977)

(d) Unpublished

Atkins, E., 'Historical Notes and Memories of Woodhouse, 1086-1953' (Duplicate typescript, SCL, 1953)

Baker, J.A.C., 'A History of the Nut and Bolt Industry in the West Midlands', M. Comm. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1965

Blanch, D., 'Nation, Empire and the Birmingham Working Class, 1899-1914', Ph. D. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1975

Burke, C., 'Working-Class Politics in Sheffield, 1900-1920', Ph. D. thesis, Sheffield City Polytechnic, 1983

Copley, J.H., 'The General Strike in South Yorkshire', M.A. thesis, University of Sheffield, 1972

Hamilton, I.W., 'Education for Revolution: the Plebs League and Labour College Movement, 1908-1921', M.A. thesis, University of Warwick, 1972

Hastings, R.P., 'The Labour Movement in Birmingham, 1927-1945', M.A. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1959

Jones, S.G., 'The British Labour Movement and Working-Class Leisure, 1918-1939', Ph. D. thesis, University of Manchester, 1983

Kelly, T.H., 'Wages and Labour Organisation in the Brass Trade of Birmingham and District', Ph. D. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1930

Ledbetter, R.M., 'Sheffield's Industrial History from about 1700 with Special Reference to the Abbeydale Works' (Duplicate typescript, SCL, N.D.)

Mathers, H., 'Sheffield's Municipal Politics, 1893-1926. Parties, Personalities and the Rise of Labour', Ph. D. thesis, University of Sheffield, 1979

Mayhew, G.J., 'The Ethical and Religious Foundations of Socialist Politics in Britain: the First Generation and their Ideals', Ph. D. thesis, University of York, 1980

Neville, R.G., 'The Yorkshire Miners, 1881-1926: a Study in Labour and Social History', Ph. D. thesis, University of Leeds, 1974

Northfield Ward Labour Party, 'Northfield Ward Labour Party, 1904-1954', (Duplicate typescript, BCL, N.D.)

Prynn, D.L., 'The Socialist Sunday Schools, the Woodcraft Folk and Allied Movements: their Moral Influence on the British Labour Movement since the 1890s', M.A. thesis, University of Sheffield, 1971

Roche, J.C., 'The History, Development and Organisation of the Birmingham Jewellery and Allied Trades', M. Comm. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1927

Rolf, K.W.D., 'Tories, Tariffs and Elections: the West Midlands in English Politics, 1918-1935', Ph. D. thesis, University of Cambridge 1974

Rowett, J.S., 'The Labour Party and Local Government: Theory and Practice in the Interwar Years', Ph. D. thesis, University of Oxford, 1979

Wright, A., 'Liberal Party Organisation and Politics in Birmingham, Coventry and Wolverhampton, 1886-1914', Ph. D. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1977